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## Lowering the Legal Alcohol Age to 18 ( Issue Brief )

Once a person in the United States of America turns 18 years of age, they have almost every freedom of an adult. They can enlist in the armed forces, buy lottery tickets, go to college, buy cigarettes/cigars, and do many more things except for one thing: legally consume/purchase alcoholic beverages. Why can people of the legal age “adult” in a variety of ways except for drinking? Underage drinking and alcohol abuse has become a major problem in the United States, but this problem could diminish if new laws were implemented to lower the legal alcohol consumption age to 18 years of age instead of 21 years of age.

Even though the legal age to consume alcohol is 21 years of age in the United States, many underage individuals do not abide by that law. It is common for these underage individuals to find their way around these laws to consume alcoholic beverages. Here are some statistics to support this point:

According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism:<sup>1</sup>

- “By age 15, about 33 percent of teens have had at least 1 drink.”<sup>1</sup>
- “By age 18, about 60 percent of teens have had at least 1 drink.”<sup>1</sup>
- “In 2015, 7.7 million young people ages 12-20 reported that they drank alcohol beyond “just a few sips” in the past month.”<sup>1</sup>

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism also states, “People ages 12 through 20 drink 11 percent of all alcohol consumed in the United States. Although youth drink less often than adults do, when they do drink, they drink more. That is because young people consume more than 90 percent of their alcohol by binge drinking. Binge drinking is consuming many drinks on occasion. Drinking alcohol and binge drinking become more prevalent as young people get older.”<sup>1</sup> One of the biggest problems amongst teenagers and people under the legal age of 21 is that they tend to binge drink. Growing up many kids and teens don’t know their limits with alcohol and that is because there is such a stigma behind the prohibition of the substance. Teens drink to get drunk and don’t drink in moderation. If the legal age to consume were lower, the stigma behind illegal drinking would not be as much as an issue in the United States. People would begin to learn to know their limits at a younger age.

Are there any pros to lowering the drinking age to 18? Yes, here are some of them.

According to [drinkingage.procon.org](http://drinkingage.procon.org) some of the pros of lowering the drinking age include...<sup>2</sup>

1. A safer environment for young people to learn their limits and to consume alcohol in.<sup>2</sup>
2. The statistics for accidents caused by people intoxicated behind the wheel could possibly diminish.<sup>2</sup>
3. Most teens drink because of the thrill of trying not to get caught.<sup>2</sup>
4. Nowadays, the legal age for consuming alcoholic beverages is not very effective because people find ways around the law to consume them.<sup>2</sup>
5. There will be less of a demand for fake ID's. Many people do not know that the market for fake ID's is booming. [drinkingage.procon.org](http://drinkingage.procon.org) brought up the idea that this could cause safety issues in the United States.<sup>2</sup>
6. Less reckless injuries and deaths from alcohol because people are afraid to get in trouble from seeking help.<sup>2</sup>

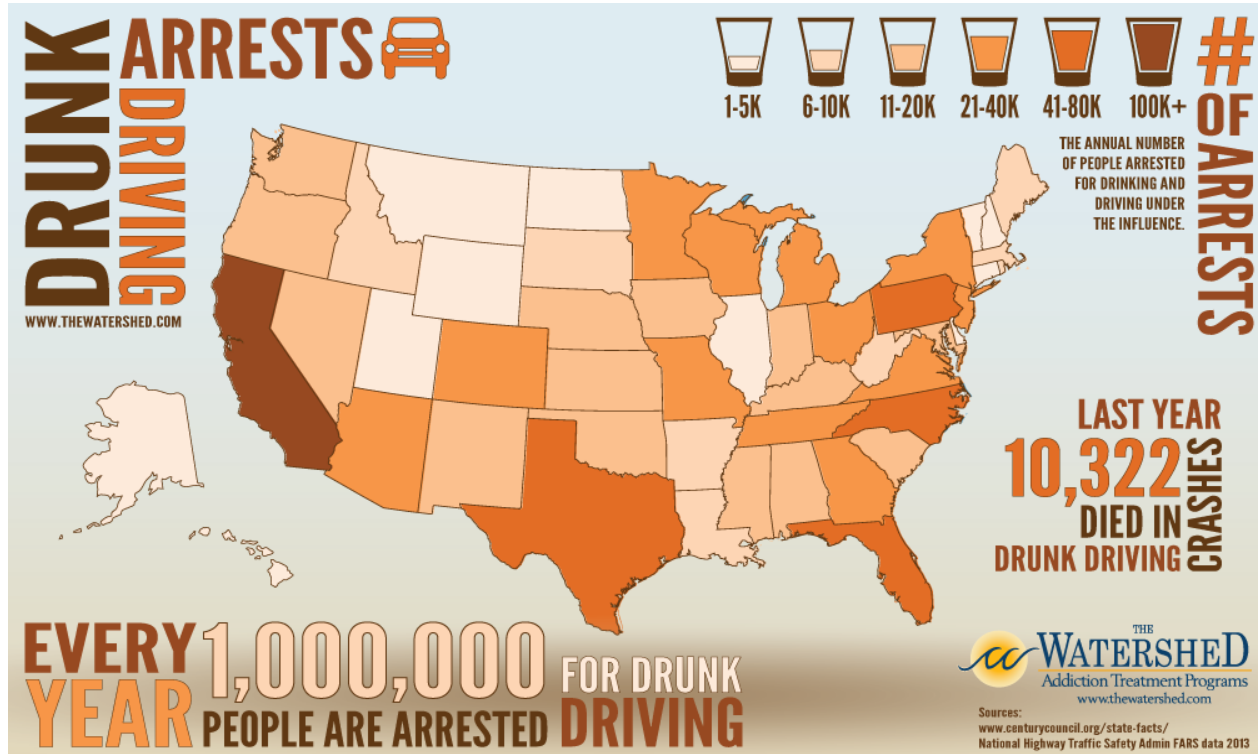
**Safer Environment:**<sup>2</sup> Like it was stated earlier in this brief, many people don't learn how to properly consume alcohol early on. They learn from parties or other situations where they may be at risk for injury, death, sexual assault, or legal trouble. If the legal age for the consumption of alcohol were lowered to 18 years of age, it would be more accepted to learn in a safer environment instead of binge drinking around other adolescents that do not have the correct experience with alcohol and do not know how much they can tolerate.

**Diminished Number of Drunk Driving Accidents:**<sup>2</sup>

[drinkingage.procon.org](http://drinkingage.procon.org) states, "Traffic accidents and fatalities are most common among newly-legal drinkers, regardless of the MLDA."<sup>2</sup> People believe that many accidents are caused by underage teenagers who illegally consume alcohol, but it has been found in studies that in reality

*it's the newly-legal drinkers that raise these statistics. Underage teenagers who drink illegally get a bad rap for this. They also stated, "There are fewer drunk driving traffic accidents and fatalities in many countries with MLDA of 18. Although the United States increased the MLDA to 21 in 1984, its rate of traffic accidents and fatalities in the 1980s decreased less than that of European countries whose legal drinking ages are lower than 21."<sup>22</sup> I have personally talked to people who have grown up and lived in foreign countries where the legal age is 18 or lower and the stigma behind illegal alcohol consumption is not relevant because people know their limits and are more educated with their own personal tolerance. This doesn't mean that all drunk driving accidents will be eliminated, but the statistics for drunk driving could possibly decline.*





**Less of a Thrill:**<sup>2</sup> One of the reasons why most young people drink is for the thrill. The thrill of doing something that is forbidden or against the law, but they partake in these illegal activities because of the thrill of not getting caught.

**Current Alcohol Laws Are Ineffective:**<sup>2</sup> It is common today for high schoolers and even middle schoolers to party and partake in illegal activities. The laws today are ineffective already, so by changing the ineffective law to make it legal, it will make more sense.

Drinking.procon.org states, “Normalizing alcohol consumption as something done responsibly in moderation will make drinking alcohol less of a taboo for young adults entering college and workforce.”<sup>22</sup>

**Less Fake ID Sales:**<sup>2</sup> Selling Fake ID’s in general creates a huge threat for the United States. Many people do not realize that buying fake ID’s for getting into bars and buying alcohol also opens the door to people illegally immigrating to the United States as well as possible terrorists.<sup>2</sup>

**Good Samaritan Rule:**<sup>2</sup> *One of the most important aspects of changing this law would be enforcing the Good Samaritan rule. The problem amongst illegal drinkers in college and high school is that they don't know how to handle their friends when they get into a troubling situation where they have consumed too much alcohol or they have injured themselves. This could potentially lead to death or serious injury which could be prevented if people weren't afraid to seek help in serious situations. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website points out that "There were about 189,000 emergency department visits by people under age 21 for injuries and other conditions linked to alcohol in 2010."<sup>6</sup> Imagine how many more people could have the possibility of being saved or treated due to people being less afraid of seeking help. Many people refuse to seek medical attention or help in general because they are scared to get in trouble or are scared to get their friends in trouble. This leads to an unnecessary amount of deaths and serious injuries which could be prevented if people were more aware of this rule and were less hesitant to seek help.*

Many other countries have the drinking age legally set to 18 years of age and some have them set for younger. Why don't we see as many problems caused by drinking in these certain countries?

Choose Responsibility states, "Recent research published by the World Health Organization found that in many European countries where the drinking age is 18 or younger (and often not enforced), 15 and 16 year-old teens have more drinking occasions per month, but fewer occasions of dangerous intoxication than their American counterparts."<sup>7</sup> The website also states that "In many southern European countries roughly one in ten of all drinking occasions results in intoxication, while in the United States almost half of all drinking occasions result in intoxication."<sup>7</sup>

There are fewer problems due to the lower drinking age as well as it not being as strictly enforced as it is in the United States. Because European countries do not enforce this law to the strict extent that the United States does, people growing up know their limits and how much they can safely consume to have a good time. Here in the United States, it is forbidden for people to even advocate for it to be a good idea to test their limits and try the substance growing up because of its illegal nature.<sup>7</sup>

Recommendation:

This issue brief is explicitly recommending that lawmakers should lower the legal alcohol consumption age from 21 years of age to 18 years of age. This change in law could have a lot of positive feedback nationally. It may be a good idea to test-drive this idea by starting off legalizing state-by-state, similar to the idea of legalizing marijuana for recreational use. The first step in this process would be to contact senators and lawmakers of the eligible states. In this case, I want to seek out senators from Pennsylvania since this is the state I currently reside in. Pat Toomey and Bob Casey Jr. are the relevant senators for Pennsylvania. They should take this into strong consideration because it could potentially be a monumental step in decreasing the amount of reckless deaths caused by alcohol in the United States. People should have a say in what they believe is wrong and right. In a country that promotes freedom of speech and the freedoms of the American people, there should be a larger discussion on this topic. People are not talking about this enough. People are not bringing this up to their lawmakers enough. It needs to be brought up and thoroughly discussed in detail in order to come to a reachable decision that could benefit all of America. People have this idea that lowering the drinking age will be nothing but detrimental to this

country and its people because it will corrupt the youth, but why not test it out? Give it a chance. Allow people to break through the stereotypes of lowering the drinking age. At first, it may be a hectic situation considering the fact that many people will feel less prohibited to drink and use that freedom, but that will die down. Talk to representatives and local lawmakers. Spread the word. Discuss and talk to others with similar and opposing views. Meet up and talk to listen, not to argue. The only way change will be implemented is if people sit down and listen to one another. Nowadays, people talk to argue and they don't talk to appreciate the views of another individual. That is what is wrong when it comes to implementing and encouraging change. There are so many more views on a subject than just the personal views one person has. Listening and discussing with others can allow for new ideas to be promoted and new ideas to be brought up and thought about. This issue brief strongly recommends that this topic about the legal age for alcohol consumption in the United States be talked about widely and deeply. Compare the statistics and data from other countries that have a lower legal drinking age to the United States and the pros and cons from each country. Each country has a different environment, but it is worth the discussion. It is important to bring this up and to talk about it, or there will be no change and people will continue to complain. Talk to representatives. Start the wave of a discussion. The purpose of this issue brief is to encourage the American people with similar, and even opposing views, to continue this conversation on a deeper level. Continue the discussion.



### Current Law for Alcohol Consumption in the United States:

The United States has strict laws when it comes to alcohol consumption and the purchasing of alcohol. The Federal Trade Commission website explicitly states, “The Congress passed the National Minimum Drinking Age Act in 1984, establishing 21 as the minimum legal purchase age.”<sup>3</sup>

If it is explicitly stated that the legal purchasing age is 21 years of age, why does that prohibit individuals from consuming alcoholic beverages below the age of 21? What many people do not realize is that it is the purchasing and possession of alcohol that is prohibited below the age of 21, not the act of drinking itself. The organization Alcohol Problems and Solutions states on their website, “The National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 required all states to raise their minimum purchase and public possession of alcohol age to 21. It does not prohibit persons under 21 (also called youth or minors) from drinking. The term “public possession” is strictly defined and does not apply to possession for the following:”<sup>4</sup>

- Religious practice<sup>4</sup>
- For medical instances when approved and allowed by doctors and other legally authorized personnel<sup>4</sup>
- “Private clubs or establishments”<sup>4</sup>
- “In the course of lawful employment by a duly licensed manufacturer, wholesaler, or retailer”<sup>4</sup>

The original reason for raising the legal alcohol age to 21 years of age in 1984 was for the purpose of getting the proper amount of money to fund the construction of highways.<sup>5</sup> Since then, the legal age has stayed

at 21 years of age. Over the years ever since the legal drinking age was raised to 21 years of age, the statistics for underage drinking has lowered. Who's to say that the statistics will not continue to be lowered if the legal age were to be lowered as well?

Conclusion:

Drinking below the legal age has become an issue in the United States today. How do we go about solving this issue? We talk about it. We discuss the topic. We think of every possibility there is and discuss in depth the pros and cons of each possibility. Many people automatically assume that lowering the legal alcohol age in this country will hurt America and its people, but why not test it out? People find ways around the law anyway, so why not test it out and lower the drinking age to see if statistics decline in deaths, binge drinking, etc. One of the biggest problems with this topic is that it is so strictly enforced in the United States that young and older people see underage drinking and drinking in general to be a shameful activity. Once that barrier is taken away and people feel less restricted, even just by lowering the legal age by a few years, it could help. This generation is so much different than previous generations, especially when it comes to binge drinking. Change is good sometimes, therefore implementing a new law to lower the legal drinking age from 21 years of age to 18 years of age could be beneficial. The point of this issue brief is to open people's minds to new ideas and new thoughts instead of being stuck with the views of past generations. It is important to advocate for change because who knows, it could end up saving more lives and lowering statistics for unnecessary deaths and injuries caused by alcohol.

## References:

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