

# Minimum Legal Drinking Age Saves Lives



After Prohibition, nearly every state designated 21 as the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA). In the 1970s, 29 states lowered their drinking ages to 18, 19 or 20, which led to an increase in alcohol traffic fatalities and injuries among youth. By 1983, 16 states had raised their MLDA back to 21 to address the increased drinking and driving traffic fatalities among youth.

In 1984, the federal government enacted the Uniform Drinking Age Act, which reduced federal transportation funds for states that did not raise the MLDA to 21. By 1988, every state had set the minimum legal drinking age at 21.<sup>1</sup> This policy's goal was to curb youth drinking and reduce its associated problems, especially traffic injuries and fatalities.<sup>2</sup>

- Alcohol is the number one drug of choice among America's youth.<sup>3</sup>
- Every day, 7,000 youth under age 16 have their first drink in the United States.<sup>4</sup>
- Approximately 5,000 youth under age 21 die annually as a result of alcohol-related injuries; 38% of those deaths involve car accidents, 32% result from homicides, and about 6% (300 deaths) are from suicides.<sup>3</sup>
- The highest prevalence of alcohol dependence among U.S. drinkers is people 18-20 years old.<sup>3</sup>
- A stunning 25.9% of underage drinkers meet the clinical criteria for alcohol abuse or dependence, compared to 9.6% of adult drinkers.<sup>5</sup>
- The total national cost due to underage drinking was estimated at \$61.9 billion in 2001.<sup>6</sup>
- A review of 49 studies examining the effects of changes in MLDA from 18 to 21 years and vice versa found that when the MLDA was lowered, fatalities increased by 10%. When the MLDA was increased, fatalities decreased by 16%.<sup>7</sup>
- A review of 132 studies (published over a 40-year period) found strong evidence that changes in minimum drinking age laws had substantial effects on youth drinking and alcohol-related harm, particularly road traffic accidents, often for years after young people reach the legal drinking age.<sup>2</sup>
- Establishing 21 as the minimum legal drinking age has:
  - saved 1,000 lives per year<sup>8</sup>
  - led to decreases in the number of teen DWI arrests, marijuana use, vandalism, crime, and alcohol consumption among youth<sup>9 10</sup>
  - decreased traffic crashes, traffic fatalities, suicide, and consumption by those under age 21<sup>11</sup>
  - reduced alcohol-related traffic deaths by 59% among youth ages 15-20 in 2000<sup>12</sup>
  - decreased the number of alcohol-related traffic deaths among 16-20 year-olds from 5,244 in 1982 to 2,115 in 2004<sup>13</sup>
  - decreased single vehicle night-time crashes involving young drivers by 11-16% at all levels of crash severity.<sup>14-16</sup>



*continued on page 2*

- decreased consumption among people under age 21. This decrease continued throughout their early twenties.<sup>17</sup>

**Bottom Line:** It's difficult to find a more successful (or more widely studied) public health intervention than keeping the minimum drinking age at 21. Anyone who argues to the contrary ignores the overwhelming scientific data about the benefits of a higher MLDA.

- For more information, please visit [www.why21.org](http://www.why21.org)

## References

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