The Legal Drinking Age Exacerbates Underage Drinking

*Should the Legal Drinking Age Be Lowered?*, 2008

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The legal drinking age of twenty-one, far from being the solution to the problem of underage drinking, has forced young adults eighteen to twenty to drink illegally and without supervision. Instead of saving lives, it endangers lives, because adolescents have no chance of learning how to drink responsibly. Yet the legal drinking age cannot be lowered without a change in our culture, along with more responsible and mature behavior by teenagers. Only then can we hope to lessen the dangers of drinking and drunk driving.

Everyone knows that excessive drinking poses many dangers, including the risk of car accidents, injuries, and fights. But according to the latest research, there are additional risks for adolescents. Alcohol significantly impairs overall brain functions in the young, particularly cognitive functions like memory, learning, spatial skills, and decision-making skills—and these impairments get worse as heavy drinking continues. Author Katy Butler states [in a 2006 *New York Times* article]:

Mounting research suggests that alcohol causes more damage to the developing brains of teenagers than was previously thought, injuring them significantly more than it does adult brains. The findings, though preliminary, have demolished the assumption that people can drink heavily for years before causing themselves significant neurological injury. And the research even suggests that early heavy drinking may undermine the precise neurological capacities needed to protect oneself from alcoholism.

Tell me something I don't know.

In over twenty years of college teaching—and living among students in the residence halls—I have observed more than my share of excessive drinking. It's not that all students are drinking; in fact, a sizable percentage of students drink very little or not at all, a fact that I delight in pointing out to students who excuse their heavy drinking with the mantra, "Everyone is doing it. It's part of being in college."

For several years, I taught an alcohol-awareness course that was crafted by the Prevention Research Institute. Since then I have been intensely interested in the ongoing research in this field. One recent article affirmed what I had long suspected and feared: statistics show that the amount of "binge" drinking among college-age students is on the rise. (I should note that there seems to be some disagreement among researchers on what constitutes binge drinking, so not everyone agrees with that last statement. But everyone agrees that binge drinking, whatever its extent, is a problem in our society.)

There Are No Easy Solutions

It's hard to know what is the best way to get the message to sink in to students about the dangers of alcohol abuse. Simply giving students the necessary information doesn't seem to work for most of the high-risk drinkers. They know they should not drink the way they do, but they don't have the will to stop. The training from Prevention Research Institute helped me to understand how psychological dependency on alcohol generally precedes physical dependency.

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At this point in my life, I have come to the following conclusions about adolescents and drinking:

- The raising of the legal drinking age to 21 is part of the problem, not the solution. Many have argued that raising the drinking age has led to fewer traffic fatalities among people under 21. However, I have seen no solid evidence that the legal drinking age of 21 is the *direct cause* of the decrease in these fatalities. (Correlation is not the same thing as causality.) In fact, there is evidence that alcohol-related traffic fatalities have *increased* for people aged 21 to 24 since the legal drinking age was changed. A more likely reason for the decrease in fatalities in the under-21 age group is the increased use of designated drivers.

- I remain convinced that a person who is old enough to die for his/her country is old enough to have a few (note the adjective) drinks. At age 18, a person is old enough to vote, get married, sign legal contracts, and do many other adult things. At the same time, we should insist that if people want to be treated like adults, they must *act* like adults. This is difficult in a society where adolescence sometimes extends into people's thirties.

- Prohibition didn't work in the past, and it's not working now. My experience in working with college students has convinced me that making alcohol a "forbidden fruit" is counterproductive. (This strategy has failed since the time of Adam and Eve.) It would be better to allow it, while creating a culture in which it is socially unacceptable to abuse it.

- This means that we "older" folks need to take a look at what messages we send to youth by our own drinking habits. In my opinion, many sectors of our society have an unhealthy approach to alcohol. We need to discourage overconsumption of alcoholic beverages at any age. Everybody knows that consuming small amounts of alcohol can actually be beneficial to health, like the glass of wine many people have with dinner. On the other hand, much research shows that more than a few drinks per day can lead to all kinds of health problems. We now know that this is especially true for people under 20.

### Teenagers Who Drink Excessively Risk Severe Dangers

In the words of a recovering drug addict whom I once met, when you abuse your body with alcohol and/or drugs, "sooner or later you will have to pay the piper." She was referring to health problems that emerged many years after she was clean and sober. Most teens don't want to think about how their youthful excesses will come back to bite them in the butt later in life. But some of those bad effects show up right away. I often wonder if the lack of motivation and poor performance of some of my students is not directly related to drinking—to say nothing of the problems of serious injuries, sexual assault, and blackouts.

Changing the culture of drinking on college campuses, and in society as a whole, will take a lot of work. In my experience, drinking in Europe tends to be more of an accompaniment to a good meal or a social event, rather than an end in itself. (This is not to say that Europe doesn't have its share of people with alcoholism.) Excessive drinking is frowned upon, and drunk driving is rewarded with draconian penalties. These are the kinds of attitudes and policies I'd like to see more in the U.S.

*I want to make it clear to my younger readers that I do not advocate breaking the law.* At the same time, we as a society need to look at the current legal drinking age in most of the states, and honestly ask whether it has helped the situation. In my opinion, it has been a failed experiment. But lowering the legal drinking age will not in itself resolve the problem, unless it is accompanied by a major change in attitudes and behaviors. Teens don't want to hear this, but to a great extent, they brought the higher legal drinking age upon themselves by their age group's irresponsible conduct.

### Abusing the Body Is Immoral

Most branches of Christianity do not forbid all drinking. After all, Jesus himself was known to drink wine. But our scriptures do insist on the importance of taking care of ourselves and others. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul says, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?" Contrary to how many Christians have interpreted Paul, he does not think the body is
evil; but the abuse of our body (or anyone else’s, for that matter) is.

I sincerely hope that our young people will take the latest research on adolescent drinking to heart. It will do good for a lot more than their neurons.

Further Readings

Books


• Carol Colleran and Debra Erickson Jay Aging and Addiction: Helping Older Adults Overcome Alcohol or Medication Dependence. Center City, MN: Hazelden Information Education, 2002.


Periodicals


• Donald Dougherty et al. "Age at First Drink Relates to Behavioral Measures of Impulsivity: The Immediate and


- Iain O'Neil "Teenagers Who Drink with Their Parents Are Less Likely to Binge Drink, According to a Study of 10,000 Children," Morning Advertiser (United Kingdom), May 11, 2007.


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Gale Document Number: GALE|EJ3010520206