



On Lowering the Drinking Age from 21 to 18

Sergeant John Flannigan, Vermont State Police

Injury and Death Rates

Lowering the minimum drinking age back to 18 will lead to an increase in injury and death rates.

- When the minimum legal drinking age is increased, death and injury rates go down. When the minimum legal drinking age is lowered, injury and death rates go up.
- The age 21 policy, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, has prevented a total of 17,359 deaths nationwide since 1975.
- In the pre-21 drinking law years, the drinking 18-to 20-year-old drivers in Vermont were 200 percent over represented in the alcohol-related fatal crash drivers. Now, under current law, they are 100 percent over represented, a reduction of 50 percent.

In Vermont, all fatal crashes involving alcohol dropped to 25 in 2002, down from 50 in 1986, the year the drinking age was raised.

Loss of Federal Funds

Based on FY 2007 apportionments, the penalty for Vermont to have its drinking age under 21 could result in a loss of as much as \$17.4 M in federal funds, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Barbara Cimaglio, Vermont Department of Health

Health and Social Problems

The minimum legal drinking age is the most well-studied alcohol policy in the United States.

A review of 40 years of literature (1960 to 2000) by Wagenaar and Toomey on the effects of minimum drinking age concluded higher legal drinking ages reduces alcohol consumption, and higher legal drinking ages reduce rates of traffic crashes.

The review concluded that 75 percent of published studies found higher drinking ages associated with lower rates of health and social problems. (*Wagenaar and Toomey*)

The Health Departments mission is to protect the public health, and alcohol can be extremely damaging and detrimental to an individual's health.

Repeated exposure to alcohol during adolescent years leads to deficits in cognitive abilities, including learning and memory.

Recent evidence suggests that heavy drinking during adolescence and young adulthood is associated with poorer neurocognitive functioning during the young adult years. Attention and visual/spatial skills are especially affected.

Health and Social Problems (Continued)

This is important because a substantial portion of the young adult population drinks at potentially harmful levels.

Brain imaging studies have demonstrated that heavy consumption during adolescence and young adulthood also can lead to subtle but significant abnormalities in brain structure and function.

A 2001 survey of college students in Vermont showed 79 percent reported using alcohol in the past month and 53 percent reported binge drinking (five or more drinks).

Youth who begin drinking alcohol before the age of 15 are five times more likely to develop alcohol problems than those who start after age 21. (*The National Survey on Drug Use and Health Report, 10/22/04.*)

The Health Department has closely tracked drinking rates through the Youth Risk Behavior Survey during the decade between 1995 and 2005.

- Alcohol use by 12th graders dropped from 63 percent in 1995 to 50 percent in 2005.
- Alcohol use by 8th graders dropped from 40 percent in 1995 to 19 percent in 2005.
- Older students binge drink (more than five drinks) more than younger students
- 33 percent of 12th graders binge drink in 2005 compared to 42 percent in 1995.
- 7 percent of 8th graders binge drink in 2005 compared to 12 percent in 1995.
- Binge drinking rates for young adults age 18 to 20 declined from 53 percent in 1990 to a current rate of 32percent.

The bottom line here is that a higher legal drinking ages reduces alcohol consumption. (*Wagenaar and Toomey*)

State's DETER Program

Gov. Douglas has set a goal to put an SAP counselor in every middle and high school for two days per week. We have 157 schools in Vermont that include grades seven and higher and his hope is to have specialists in every one of those schools.

Students are routinely educated by SAP counselors about the dangers of alcohol and substance abuse.

The DETER program placement of SAP counselors into the school systems is proving to be a success in reducing the prevalence of alcohol use.