

<http://loweringdrinkingage.procon.org/>

**PRO:**

Once an individual turns 18 it is the age of adulthood in the United States and adults should have the right to make their own decisions about alcohol consumption. Turning 18 entails receiving the rights and responsibilities of adulthood to vote, smoke cigarettes, serve on juries, get married, sign contracts, be prosecuted as adults, and join the military -- which includes risking one's life.

Allowing 18- to 20-year-olds to drink alcohol in regulated environments with supervision would decrease unsafe drinking activity. Prohibiting this age group from drinking in bars, restaurants, and other licensed locations causes them to drink in unsupervised places such as fraternity houses or house parties where they may be more prone to binge drinking and other unsafe behavior.

Traffic accidents and fatalities are most common among newly-legal drinkers, regardless of the minimum legal drinking age. In 2009, the 21- to 24-year-old age group had the highest percentage of drivers in fatal crashes with blood-alcohol concentration (BAC) levels of .08 or higher – 35 percent. Any increase in traffic accidents or fatalities in 18- to 20-year-olds would be offset by a decrease for those 21 and older.

Lowering the minimum legal drinking age from 21 to 18 would diminish the thrill of breaking the law to get a drink. Normalizing alcohol consumption as something done responsibly in moderation will make drinking alcohol less of a taboo for young adults entering college and the workforce. A minimum legal drinking age of 21 is largely ineffective because the majority of teens continue to consume alcohol. According to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse, underage drinking accounts for 17.5% (\$22.5 billion) of consumer spending for alcohol in the United States. In 2006, 72.2% of twelfth graders reported drinking alcohol at some point in their lives.

A minimum legal drinking age of 18 is not a priority for many law enforcement agencies. Police are inclined to ignore the minimum legal drinking age because of resource limitations, statutory obstacles, perceptions that punishments are inadequate, and the time and effort required for processing and paperwork. On average a study found that two of every 1,000 occasions of illegal drinking by youth under 21 results in an arrest by law enforcement.

Drinking alcohol is an enjoyable activity. 18- to 20-year-old adults should not be denied that enjoyment when other pleasurable activities are legal at age 18. Lowering the minimum drinking age would reduce the number of underage people who are hurt from alcohol-related injuries or accidents due to fear of legal consequences if they sought medical attention.

Lowering the minimum legal drinking age would be good for the economy. More people would legally be able to drink in bars, restaurants, and other licensed establishments. Revenue would increase for private business owners, and greater amounts of tax revenue would be collected by the government.

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### **CON:**

Lowering the minimum legal drinking age from 21 to 18 will irresponsibly allow a greater segment of the population to drink alcohol in bars and nightclubs, which are not safe environments. 76% of bars have sold alcohol to obviously intoxicated patrons, and about half of drivers arrested for driving while intoxicated or killed as alcohol-involved drivers in traffic crashes did their drinking at licensed establishments. Neighborhoods with higher densities of bars, nightclubs, and other alcohol-selling locations suffer more frequent assaults and other violent crimes.

The right to drink should have a higher age of initiation because of the dangers posed by drinking. Many rights in the United States are conferred on citizens at age 21 or older. A person cannot legally purchase a handgun, gamble in a casino, or adopt a child until age 21, rent a car at age 25, or run for President until age 35. Drinking should be similarly restricted due to the responsibility required to self and others.

A minimum legal drink age reduces traffic accidents and fatalities. A 2002 study of the legal drinking age and traffic accidents found higher legal drinking ages associated with lower rates of traffic accidents in 98% of all cases. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) estimated that the minimum drinking age of 21 decreased the number of fatal traffic accidents for 18- to 20-year-olds by 13% and saved approximately 27,052 lives from 1975-2008.

A minimum legal drinking age of 21 reduces alcohol consumption. A 2002 study, found that a higher legal drinking age was associated with lower alcohol consumption. In 2009, the NHTSA found that the percentage of weekend nighttime drivers with a blood-alcohol concentration of .08 or higher declined from 5.4% in 1986 to 2.2% in 2007.

A minimum legal drinking age of 21 laws reduces the number of underage drinkers. The percentage of underage drinkers has decreased since 1984 when most minimum legal drinking age of 21 laws came into effect. Studies indicate that when the drinking age is 21, those younger than 21 drink less and continue to drink less throughout the entirety of their life. The minimum legal drinking age should stay at 21 because people tend to be more mature and responsible at 21 than 18. 18-year-olds are typically entering a new phase of independence from their parents through college or the workforce, and are more susceptible to binge drinking, risky sexual activity, and other irresponsible behavior due to lack of maturity.

Drinking at 18 is not a right. A US district court ruled on Dec. 22, 1978 that 21 is "reasonably related to a state objective of reducing highway crashes," and that 21 withstands a constitutional challenge on three key legal issues: (1) drinking alcohol is not a "fundamental" right guaranteed by the Constitution, (2) age is not inherently a "suspect" criteria for discrimination (in contrast to race or ethnicity, for example) and (3) using the drinking age to prevent highway crashes has a "rational basis" in available scientific evidence.