



The Drinking Age Buzz

There's a flawed theory brewing that restrictions on alcohol entice kids to abuse it

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The Dallas Morning News
September 6, 2005

We all know that well-intended laws can have unintended consequences. When the federal government caps the price of oil, gasoline gets more expensive. When it raises the minimum wage, people who used to get a lousy wage often find themselves out of a job, making a wage of zero. As economist Milton Friedman once said, if you put the government in charge of the Sahara Desert, there would soon be a shortage of sand. So it's not hard to believe an argument that has gained currency lately: When we raised the drinking age from 18 to 21, we didn't solve the problem of irresponsible alcohol consumption by young people – we made it worse.

This is an elegant, provocative theory. It also dovetails with the common-sense notion that there's something grossly unfair and irrational about regarding 18-year-olds as adults when it comes to voting or enlisting in the military, but treating them like middle schoolers when it comes to drinking. The whole line of argument is perfect, except for one thing: It's about two solar systems away from reality.

As it happens, there is a mountain of evidence on the effects of raising the drinking age. It all shows that the change had no ill effects and, in fact, did an immense amount of good.

To start with, barring alcohol sales to those under 21 didn't cause an epidemic of drunkenness among those who lost their privileges. Monitoring the Future, which conducts annual surveys of attitudes and behavior among young people, says that in 1984, when the federal government mandated a drinking age of 21, 45.4 percent of college students engaged in binge drinking, defined as five or more drinks in a row in any given two-week period. By 2003, only 38.5 percent did – a decline of 15 percent.

The number of students who drink every day, meanwhile, has fallen by a third, while the number of students who abstain in any given month has risen by 61 percent. It may be hard to believe, but when we banned drinking by those between the ages of 18 and 21, they drank less. Sometimes, laws don't have unintended consequences – they have intended ones.

College kids are not the only group showing positive results. High school seniors are far less likely to engage in binge drinking than they were in the days when 18-year-olds could legally buy beer – even though more than 90 percent say alcohol is still easy to get.

Critics of the higher drinking age forget that the change also had another huge benefit: saving lives. Drinking and driving used to be the leading cause of death among teenagers, but no more. In 1984, more than 10,000 drinking drivers under the age of 21 were involved in fatal crashes. By 2003, the number was down to 8,035 – a decline of 22 percent.

Limiting the supply of beer clearly stanching the flow of blood. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that the higher drinking age saves more than 900 lives every year. Since 1984, some 18,000 lives have been spared.



It's true that we don't have a consistent national policy on when to confer the rights and responsibilities of adulthood. Telling someone he can fight in Iraq but not have a beer when he returns stateside is an awkward business at best.

But consistency is not the sole virtue in writing laws. There's nothing illogical in tailoring policies to fit what simple experience has taught us: that teens can be trusted more with some freedoms than with others. If 18-year-old soldiers showed a propensity for blowing themselves up with hand grenades, we might raise the age of enlistment.

When government policies defeat their own purposes, they deserve to be repealed. But lowering the drinking age to curb alcohol abuse is like trying to reduce crime by disbanding the police.