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AlterNet / By *Scott Thill*



So Why, Exactly, Is the Drinking Age in the US Stuck at 21 Years?

The arguments for keeping such an absurdly high drinking age have almost no basis. It's time to reconsider why 21 is the USA's drinking age.

July 6, 2011 | You can drive a car at 16, you can vote at 18. But almost 80 years after repealing alcohol prohibition in the United States, there's still a minimum legal drinking age of 21. And the debate over the issue is in a Siberia of political hibernation.

Consider another recent report, this time from economists Christopher Carpenter and Carlos Dobkin. Published in this spring issue of the *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Carpenter and Dobkin's "[The Minimum Legal Drinking Age and Public Health](#)" concluded that "evidence strongly suggests that setting the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) at 21 is better from a cost and benefit perspective than setting it at 18 and that any proposal to reduce the drinking age should face a very high burden of proof."


How did they arrive at that seemingly obvious conclusion? By crunching the lethal numbers.

"We analyzed survey data on alcohol consumption and administrative data on

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methodological approaches that gave us very similar answers."

"First, we showed that, as documented by other authors, when states raised their drinking ages to 21 in the 1970s and 1980s there were significant decreases in both alcohol consumption and fatalities among 18- to 20 year-olds," Carpenter said. "Second, we showed that during the late 1990s and 2000s, when the minimum legal drinking age was 21 in all states, there is a large discrete increase in both alcohol consumption and deaths -- primarily traffic fatalities and suicides -- that occurs precisely when people turn 21 and

mortality collected from death certificates," Carpenter told AlterNet. "We used two different

that persists for at least two years. This is true even when we account for 21st birthday 'celebration' effects, and suggests that increased access and exposure to alcohol at age 21 in the U.S. causes significant increases in drinking and mortality."

Case closed? Not so fast, said Barrett Seaman, author of *Binge: Campus Life*

*in an Age of
Disconnection
and
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of [ChooseResponsibility.org](#). In 2008, Seaman and ChooseResponsibility.org co-founder and then-president emeritus [John McCardell](#), kicked off that debate by obtaining the signatures of 136 college presidents for the [Amethyst Initiative](#), whose primary argument was that America's MLDA was simply not working. The Initiative did its job nicely, as the asked-for national debate kicked up dust in the [mainstream](#) and [online](#) media, eventually influencing Carpenter and Dobkin's responsive report.

"Our research, among other objectives, sought to examine the [Amethyst Initiative's key claim](#) that the age-21 minimum drinking limit in the United States is not working," Carpenter told AlterNet. "The findings demonstrate that the age-21 drinking limit in the US is working, in the sense that it significantly reduces drinking and alcohol-related mortality."

But Seaman and McCardell remain unconvinced, years after the Amethyst Initiative's debut. Around the same time Carpenter and Dobkin's report landed, Seaman testified before the New York State Medical Society to gain support for the Amethyst Initiative from physicians this time instead of college presidents. He claimed that many more presidents voiced personal support but refused to sign because of blowback from their constituents or predictable opposition from groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving ([MADD](#)). Both parties agree on preventative measures like education and tough drunk-driving punishments like interlocked ignition systems, license revocation and jail time. But they inevitably part ways on lowering the MLDA, despite the fact that [America is the only major nation with a MLDA of 21](#). Flanked by Micronesia, Fiji, Indonesia, Palau and Sri Lanka, the U.S. stands mostly alone while other nations hover between a MLDA of 16-19, and others, like Greece and Austria, have none at all.

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