

21 Candles

In 1984, the U.S. Congress passed the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, requiring all states to raise the drinking age to 21. This was the first national standardization of the drinking age in the history of the United States. Prior to Prohibition (1920-1933), many states did not have any laws in place regarding the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA). Between 1933 and about 1970, the MLDA in most states was 21, which mirrored the voting age at the time. In 1971, when the 26th Amendment lowered the voting age to 18, many states lowered the MLDA accordingly. Currently, the U.S. is one of 12 other countries in the world with the highest comparative drinking age of 21. In fact, “of the 190 countries, 61% have a drinking age of 18 or 19 years old.”¹ With the majority of countries in the world having a lower drinking age, a debate has begun as to whether the U.S. should lower the MLDA to 18 or 19.

Those defending the MLDA's remaining at 21 argue that it has made the roads safer, and indeed, saved many lives. The CDC points to a study which finds a 16% median decline in motor vehicle crashes in states where the MLDA was raised to 21.² Another study by the National Highway Traffic Safety Association (NHTSA) estimates that the increase of the drinking age saved 31,417 lives between the years of 1975 and 2016.³

Those in favor of lowering the MLDA argue that, according to U.S. law, an 18-year-old is an adult. It seems absurd, they reason, that soldiers can fight and die for their country but cannot legally be served a beer in a restaurant or bar. Therefore, it is argued, 18-year-olds should have the right to consume alcohol given that they can serve in the military and vote. Some argue, further, that prohibiting the sale of alcohol to 18 to 20-year-olds has the unintended effect of making alcohol more desirable because it is taboo. They point out that drinking loses much of its allure when it becomes a mundane, legal activity. Finally, the culture of drinking is very present in college environments, despite the majority of undergraduate students being underage. This results in a lot of unsupervised and unsafe situations associated with alcohol because students have not been exposed to responsible drinking. Consequently, there is an increased risk of binge drinking, which can harm one's physical and mental health.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is the MLDA an imposition on one's rights as an adult?
2. How should the government balance the right of autonomy with the need to protect citizens from harm?
3. Leaving aside its legal status, is it morally wrong to drink underage?
4. What are the significant differences between being 18 and 21?

¹ <https://drinkingage.procon.org/minimum-legal-drinking-age-in-other-countries/>

² <https://www.cdc.gov/alcohol/fact-sheets/minimum-legal-drinking-age.htm>

³ <https://drinkingage.procon.org/>

