



PREVENTION UPDATE

The Age 21 Minimum Legal Drinking Age Law

Overview

Currently, all 50 states limit alcohol purchases to people aged 21 and over. But that hasn't always been the case. In fact, it was July 17, 1984, when President Ronald Reagan signed the national 21 minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) legislation into law, saying, "... raising that drinking age is not a fad or an experiment. It's a proven success. Nearly every State that has raised the drinking age to 21 has produced a significant drop in the teenage driving fatalities." At that time, only 23 states had minimum alcohol purchasing ages of 21 years old. The legislation called for withholding federal highway funds from the remaining 27 states if they did not follow suit. By 1988, all states had set 21 as the MLDA.

[A Call to Action: Changing the Culture of Drinking at U.S. Colleges](#) from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in 2002 designated increased enforcement of minimum drinking age laws as a tier 2 prevention strategy. It states, "The minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) law is the most well-studied alcohol control policy. Compared to other programs aimed at youth in general, increasing the legal age for purchase and consumption of alcohol has been the most successful effort to date in reducing underage drinking and alcohol-related problems. Most studies suggest that higher legal drinking ages reduce alcohol consumption, and over half found that a higher legal drinking age is associated with decreased rates of traffic crashes. Studies also indicate that policies are less effective if they are not consistently enforced. Moreover, the certainty of consequences is more important than severity in deterring undesirable behavior. The benefits of the MLDA have occurred with minimal enforcement, yet studies of the effects of increased enforcement show that it is highly effective in reducing alcohol sales to minors. Increased enforcement—specifically compliance checks on retail alcohol outlets—typically cuts rates of sales to minors by at least half. Efforts to reduce the use of false age identification and tighter restrictions on 'home delivery' of alcohol may also help enhance the effectiveness of this law."

MLDA 21 laws have many components that target outlets that sell alcohol to minors; adults who provide alcoholic beverages to minors; and minors who purchase or attempt to purchase, possess, or consume alcohol. In addition, there are companion laws that provide for lower blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limits for underage drivers and other legislation, such as laws that require registration of beer keg purchases and make hosts liable for the actions of underage drinking guests.

What the Evidence Tells Us

In *[An Examination of the Criticisms of the Minimum Legal Drinking Age 21 Laws in the United States from a Traffic-Safety Perspective](#)*, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says, "Perhaps no alcohol safety measure has attracted more research and public attention or shown more consistent evidence of effectiveness than the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) 21 law in the United States."

But the positive effect of the 21 MLDA is not limited to traffic safety. A number of studies have found that the 21 MLDA has also reduced alcohol consumption among 18- to 20-year-olds and is associated with reductions in other problems among underage youth, such as alcohol-related suicide and vandalism. And [one review of MLDA studies](#) concluded that "the benefits of the legal drinking age of 21 have occurred with little or no active enforcement in most areas. Simply by increasing enforcement levels and deterring adults from



selling or providing alcohol to minors, even more injuries and deaths related to alcohol use among youth are likely to be prevented each year.”

[The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) calls for maintaining and enforcing minimum legal drinking age and zero tolerance laws. It points out that research shows that lowering the MLDA can increase alcohol-impaired crashes involving young drivers by a median of 10 percent. “Equally important are laws that crack down on drivers under age 21 who drive after consuming alcohol. All states have ‘zero-tolerance laws’ that prohibit young people from driving with any detectable BAC [blood alcohol concentration]. Such measures lower the fatal crash rate between 9 percent and 24 percent. States should maintain their MLDA at 21 and vigorously enforce MLDA and zero tolerance laws.”

Lessons Learned From Colleges and Universities

What Campuses Can Do

The following is a partial list of actions that colleges and universities have done to enforce MLDA 21:

- Restricting or prohibiting alcohol at social activities on campus or at activities sponsored by fraternities and other student organizations
- Aggressively enforcing minimum drinking age laws in residence halls and throughout campus
- Providing alcohol-free late night social options, coffee houses, or other alcohol-free gathering places on campus
- Establishing campus-community partnerships focused on stemming the illegal flow of alcohol to underage students through bars, liquor stores, and off-campus parties

Beefed-Up Enforcement at the University of Maryland

The Maryland Office of Crime Control and Prevention has awarded the University of Maryland’s Police Department a \$30,000 grant to crack down on underage drinking on and around the campus. The grant funds more police working later hours who will now have the flexibility to break up more parties and check IDs at local bars. University Police spokesman Capt. Marc Limansky told the [Diamondback Online](#), police can now enter bars to re-card patrons who are already inside, “Given [the campus] problems with underage drinking, we’re using the grant to target busier times, like weekends, to pay officers overtime to go out and enforce violations of underage alcohol laws and open alcohol containers,” Limansky said. Although police broke up several parties over the weekend and issued at least 12 alcohol citations, the amount of underage drinking the first weekend of the semester was largely the same as it has been in past years—which is exactly what police are hoping to stop with this new money.

Higher Education Center Resources

Publications

- [Enforcing the Minimum Age Drinking Law: A Survey of College Administrators and Security Chiefs \[archived\]](#)
- [Environmental Management: A Comprehensive Strategy for Reducing Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse on College Campuses](#)

Web Page

- [Minimum Legal Drinking Age](#)

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