

Legal at 18 ... should that include alcohol, too?

There are thousands of reasons to keep the minimum drinking age at 21.

Yet today, an unlikely group is challenging the nearly 25-year-old law that established a national minimum age to legally drink alcohol. More than 100 college presidents, including those at Lewis & Clark College, Pacific University and Willamette University in Oregon, have joined the so-called Amethyst Initiative.

The initiative, founded by John McCardell, president emeritus of Middlebury College and founder of a group called Choose Responsibility, calls for a national debate about lowering the drinking age from 21 to 18.

Initiative supporters contend that if the drinking age is lowered, fewer college students would drink and colleges would have more control of campus drinking. But history tells us it's a false argument that would make matters worse.

In the 1980s, following the federal government mandate, all states had adopted 21 as the legal drinking age. Consider these facts:

- Since the early 1980s, the number of young people killed annually in crashes involving drunk drivers younger than 21 has been cut in half, from more than 5,000 young people in the early 1980s to nearly 2,000 in 2005, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
- By the end of 2005, the law had saved almost 25,000 lives, NHTSA says.

Beyond those numbers, there are sound reasons why it's in our young people's best interest to delay alcohol use – and why the age-21 law makes sense.

Underage drinking is not just a safety issue; it is a serious public health issue, too. We know from research that the human brain is not fully developed until the early to mid-20s, and regular alcohol use during the tender adolescent and teen years can hamper brain development and function.

When you consider that alcohol is the most abused substance among youth, and that most kids who drink do so to get drunk, the long-term implications ought to stop us in our tracks. The evidence shows that youth who begin drinking before age 15 are four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence as an adult than those who wait until age 21.

It is often argued that lowering the drinking age would help young people learn to drink responsibly. A common perception is that alcohol is a bigger problem with American young people compared with young people in European countries, which have more liberal drinking age laws. Studies show, however, that a larger percentage of young people from nearly all European countries report drinking in the past 30 days compared

with their American counterparts, and a larger percentage of young people from most European countries report binge drinking, defined as five or more drinks in a row.

Still, too many of our young people say they drink. In Oregon, about one in every three eighth-graders, and nearly half of 11th graders, have consumed alcohol in the past month, according to an annual survey. And young girls are drinking at rates greater than that of young boys.

Those numbers do not mean the age-21 law is ineffective. Research shows that although many youth still consume alcohol, they drink less and experience fewer alcohol-related injuries and deaths.

Those numbers do mean that we have a great opportunity to continue helping kids make the healthy choice to not drink alcohol. It's also an opportunity to talk with adults in your circle, whether it be co-workers, neighbors or other parents in your child's class or sports league. What do they know about the age-21 law? How do they feel about it?

As parents, we can learn a lot from each other and continue to help change a culture in which far too many kids drink.

This article was prepared by Oregon Partnership, a statewide nonprofit that promotes healthy kids and communities through drug and alcohol awareness, drug prevention programs, and 24-hour crisis lines for treatment referrals and suicide prevention and intervention. To learn more about Oregon Partnership, and for parenting resources, please call 503-244-5211, or visit www.orpartnership.org or www.faceitparents.com.