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19 July 2013

Legal Drinking Age of 18

I was sitting in a beautiful open air café on a warm October morning with my grandmother in Cancun, Mexico. Craving a mimosa, I signaled the waiter over and politely asked him to bring me one. I was 18 years old and had taken my first trip out of the country, and here I was legally able to drink. When a citizen turns 18 in the United States, they are considered an adult and many opportunities become available to them. This includes the ability to exercise their rights to purchase cigarettes and lottery tickets, get married, sign a contract and join the military. However, unlike most other countries in the world, the legal drinking age in the United States is 21, as opposed to the standard 18 years. It wasn't always like that however; there was a point in U.S. history when there wasn't even a minimum drinking age.

Before Prohibition, there was not an enforced minimum drinking age, but when it ended in 1933, the majority of states set a minimum drinking age of 21. This varied per state, however; quite a few states set a minimum age of 18. Between 1970 and 1976, a total of 30 states had lowered their drinking age from 21 to either, 18, 19, or 20. It wasn't until the 1980's, after reports of higher teenage collision occurrences taking place in states that had lowered the drinking age, that the enactment of the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 was enforced. This required that all 50 states were to have a minimum drinking age of 21 ("Drinking Age").

Despite increasing the drinking age back to 21, though, it has not put an end to the number of fatal accidents that occur while driving under the influence; it has merely shifted the age group that experiences those accidents. Traffic fatalities and accidents occur most often in newly-legal drinkers in the US. CQ Researcher's article "Teen Driving" made reference to a chart, starting in the early 80's, depicting the percentage of teenagers between 15 and 18 involved in fatal drunk-driving accidents; the

high was at almost 50% (“Teen Driving”). In contrast, the highest percentage of drinkers involved in a fatal accident was reported to be between the ages of 21 and 24 in 2009.

In 2010, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration found that DUI’s were associated with age; the highest number of drunk-driving accidents occurred among 21 to 25 year-olds at 23.4% (“Drunk Driving Statistics”). Following this age group, an estimated 15.1% of 18 to 20 year-olds were involved in drunk-driving accidents and a smaller 5.8% of 16 and 17 year-olds. The numbers were only found to decrease after 25 years of age (“Drunk Driving Statistics”). The highest number of fatal accidents was also found to be among 21 to 24 year-olds at 34%. Members between the ages of 25 and 30 were not far behind, at 30%. Therefore, no matter what the drinking age is, the number of fatal accidents that occur in the United States will directly correlate with that set minimum age. To further argue, two years before the legal drinking age of 21 was implemented, a decline of drunk-driving accidents occurred across all demographics and age groups.

It can be argued that the legal drinking age should not be lowered to 18 to mirror European countries for one main reason: American’s start driving at earlier ages than Europeans. American’s can begin driving with a permit and parental supervision when they turn 16 and can drive on their own after six months of driving. If the drinking age was like that of Europe and the rest of the world, those that are able to drive on their own are more likely to drive under the influence (“Pros and Cons of Lowering the Drinking Age”). However, there are fewer drunk-driving accidents in many countries with a lower legal drinking limit among newly legal drivers. Some parts of Australia, such as the Northern Territory, allow citizens to obtain a license at 16 and a half, just like the United States. The number of fatal accidents occurring among the ages of 17 to 25 year-olds due to driving under the influence was 25% of the total 1,292 deaths in 2011 (“Road Policing Statistics”). That percentage may seem like a lot, however, the number of deaths is a small fraction compared to that of the United States, with 32,885 people dying due to driving under the influence (“Drunk Driving Fatalities-National Statistics”).

The re-raising of the minimum drinking age has not shown a drastic decrease in fatalities compared to that of European countries with lower legal drinking ages. Fatalities and crashes in the U.S. have decreased less than that of European countries, whose legal drinking ages are lower than 21, since the 1980's ("Pros and Cons of Lowering the Drinking Age").

Others argue that lowering the drinking age would be medically unacceptable. Alcohol consumption can interfere with development and brain growth, especially in areas concerning planning and organization. Dr. David Hanson, professor at the State University of New York at Potsdam, writes in dispute:

> "In many societies most people drink and they begin doing so in the home from a very early age. There is neither evidence or any reason to even suspect that members of these groups are brain impaired compared to those societies that do not permit young people to consume alcohol. There appears to be absolutely no evidence whatsoever that the light or moderate consumption of alcohol by persons under the age of 21 causes any brain impairment or harm." ("Drinking Age")

Even if there were more concrete evidence, when a citizen turns 18, he or she have the rights and the ability to decide; we have many options and can choose how we want to live. When a citizen turns 18, he or she is able to vote, buy cigarettes, play the lottery and join the military, including many other choices. Among those rights are the ability to purchase cigarettes, which contain a drug that kills over half of its users and over 600,000 non-smokers from secondhand smoke a year. In 2009, 443,000 people died prematurely as a result of smoking cigarettes, while 24,518 died from alcohol consumption. We are legally allowed to purchase an item at 18 years old that statistically kills more people every day compared to alcohol, but are unable to purchase alcohol until 3 years later. We are also able to make very important decisions, such as signing a contract or joining the military, which balances life and

death. Therefore, if we are able to join the military or kill our lungs with tobacco smoke, we should be able to make the choice to potential damage our brains from future growth.

Overall, as a citizen in the United States, at age 18 we are legally able to make the decision to ruin our lungs and potentially develop cancer, or throw ourselves into combat and risk our lives in the field every day. We are able to make decisions and choices as free and independent individuals when we turn 18, so why must we wait three more years to consume alcohol? No matter the change in the minimum age, it is found that new drivers are the most likely group to be involved in a drunk-driving accident, not just in the United States, but around the world. Changing the age to 21 only increased the probability of that age group also being involved in drunk-driving accidents. Europe and the rest of the world statistically show less drunk-driving fatalities across the board, and the drinking ages are predominantly all around age 18. Lowering the drinking age would not only show a decrease in drunk-driving fatalities among 18 to 25 year olds, but will also continue to show that drinking at a younger age than 21, when done in moderation, will not cause brain damage or prohibit brain development. The drinking age being set to 21 is not prohibiting us from future damage, it's prohibiting us from being able to exercise our basic rights to make our own decisions as free and independent individuals; prohibiting us from making the decision as an adult to consume alcohol.

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