

# Underage drinking laws reduce fatal accidents, saving 732 lives per year

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State laws that prohibit people under the age of 21 from purchasing or possessing alcohol, and from driving with any alcohol in their system save 732 lives a year in the United States, according to a study released today that has examined 23 years of research on the subject. The study further shows that if every state adopted 'use and lose' laws—suspending the license of anyone under 21 cited for possession, consumption or attempt to purchase alcohol—an additional 165 lives would be saved.

The study appears today in the online version of the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research* (ACER). It was funded by the Substance Abuse Policy Research Program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

Researchers analyzed data from 1982 through to 2004, using the Alcohol Policy Information System (1998-2005); the Digests of State Alcohol-Highway Safety Related Legislation (1983-2006); the Westlaw database; and the Fatality Analysis Reporting System data set (1982-2004). They looked at six key underage drinking laws and four general impaired-driving and traffic safety laws, and found the most significant impact came from four underage laws.

Three of the four more general laws that target all drivers also were effective in reducing drinking driver crash deaths for all ages, the study found. These included laws that make it illegal to drive with over .08 blood alcohol content (BAC); suspend a license for exceeding the .08 BAC while driving; and enable a police officer to pull over a driver who

was not wearing a seatbelt. While the direct effects of laws targeting drivers of all ages on adult drinking drivers aged 26 and older were similar, the results were of a smaller magnitude compared to the findings for those aged 20 and younger.

"These results provide substantial support for the effectiveness of under age 21 drinking laws and point to the importance of key underage drinking and traffic safety laws in efforts to reduce underage drinking-driver crashes," says James C. Fell, M.S., of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation (PIRE) in Calverton, Maryland.

Another important finding from the study was that beer consumption per capita across all ages in states has a direct relationship with underage drinking and driving. The authors discovered that the higher the beer consumption per capita, the higher the youth crash rate.

"This could be because adult alcohol consumption is correlated with youth consumption," Fell says. "The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that if the adult binge drinking rate is high, it is also high for youth."

Two underage drinking laws—registering kegs and graduated licensing—were found to have almost no impact on fatality rates, according to the study.

"We didn't find that laws mandating that beer kegs be registered to the purchaser made any difference in reducing underage drinking and driving fatal crashes. In fact with this particular [law](#), we saw 12 percent more drinking-related traffic fatalities amongst those under 21," says Fell.

He said possible reasons may be that the law was not well enforced, or that in states that adopted keg registration laws, to circumvent the issue

of registering beer kegs, young people choose instead to bring their own beer or liquor to underage parties, and as a result become more intoxicated from consuming their own booze than if a beer keg was the only source of alcohol.

Forty-four states have laws that restrict young drivers with an intermediate license from driving late at night, but Fell says this had no demonstrable effect on preventing underage drinking-related fatalities. The authors did not account for the start times of the night restrictions, instead focusing on whether a state had this law.

"So it could be that restrictions that start at 9:00 p.m. may have an effect, but the ones starting at 1:00 a.m. are very unlikely to make an impact because they begin too late," says Fell.

Last year, Fell and colleagues found that laws making it illegal to possess or purchase alcohol by anyone under the age of 21 had led to an 11 percent drop in alcohol-related traffic deaths among youth; secondly, they found that states with strong laws against fake IDs reported 7 percent fewer alcohol-related fatalities among drivers under the age of 21.

"People who want to lower the minimum drinking age say that the positive effects of raising it to 21 only took place in the 1980s and has since lost its impact," Fell says. "But we looked at these numbers over a 23-year period. This study shows the impact is still strong, and is keeping the numbers of underage drinking and driving deaths down—more so than if the drinking age is lowered."

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