

Alcohol-impaired driving crimes spike immediately after drinking age

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A new study led by a Northern Medical Program (NMP) researcher shows that alcohol-impaired driving crimes spike immediately after the minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) is reached, indicating that minimum legal drinking age legislation in Canada can have a major impact on young drivers.

In the study, published this month in the international journal *Addiction*, Dr. Russ Callaghan and his research team looked at national Canadian police-reported crime statistics between 2009-2013. The paper is available online at: [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... /add.13310/abstract](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/add.13310/abstract).

The team found that drivers just older than the legal age had significant increases in commission of alcohol-impaired driving crimes compared to those immediately under the restriction. Release from [drinking-age](#) restrictions was associated with increases in alcohol-impaired driving offenses perpetrated by [young drivers](#) in Canada, ranging from 28%-43% among males and 19%-40% among females.

"As soon as youth are given legal access to alcohol, there are immediate effects on the road," says Callaghan, the study's lead author and an associate professor in the Northern Medical Program. "The number of police-reported alcohol-impaired driving incidents involving both male and female drivers who have just reached the [legal drinking age](#) rises dramatically, which illustrates the impact that alcohol-related legislation can have on alcohol-impaired driving crimes and overall public health."

At present time, the minimum legal drinking age is 18 years of age in Alberta, Manitoba, and Québec, and 19 years in the rest of Canada. Recently, the Canadian Public Health Association and a national expert-panel working group not only recommended that the legal drinking age be raised to at least 19 years, but also identified 21 years as the ideal. The current findings provide support for the position that raising the drinking age would likely reduce alcohol-impaired driving crimes in newly alcohol-restricted age groups.

"Our research provides current information for both Canadian and international policymakers to draw on when considering alcohol policy reform and the effectiveness of MLDA legislation," notes Callaghan. "Drinking-age laws can have major consequences on driving safety and are an important part of contemporary alcohol-control and driving-related policies designed to limit alcohol-impaired driving among young people, as well as its sometimes catastrophic consequences."

Dr. Callaghan's research is part of a larger series of studies he is pursuing over the next several years that investigate the impact of alcohol-related legislation on a variety of harms, including young people's binge drinking, alcohol-related injuries requiring hospital-based treatment, and patterns of criminal victimization among youth.

More information: Russell C. Callaghan et al. Impacts of Drinking-age Legislation on Alcohol-Impaired Driving Crimes Among Young People in Canada, 2009-2013, *Addiction* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/add.13310](https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13310)

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