

# Why 21?



MYTH VS. FACT

## **Myth:**

*The law only makes youth want to drink because it's a "forbidden fruit." If drinking alcohol was legal at 18, it wouldn't be a big deal and those under 21 would be less likely to drink.*

**Fact:** When the "forbidden fruit" is no longer forbidden, youth simply drink more. In states where the drinking age was 18, those under 21 drank more than youth in states where the minimum drinking age was 21 and they continued to drink more as adults in their early 20s. In states where the drinking age was 21, teenagers drank less than youth in states where the minimum drinking age was 21 and continued to drink less through their early 20s. But drinking more is not the only issue.

Because alcohol impairs decision-making capabilities, young people who drink are more likely to engage in risk-taking behavior. And this risky behavior can lead to unintentional deaths and injuries associated with driving or engaging in other activities that lead to homicide and violence, suicide attempts, sexual assault, risky sexual behavior, and vandalism and property damage.

And, youth who started drinking before age 15, compared to those who waited until they were 21, were 12 times more likely to be unintentionally injured while under the influence of alcohol, 7 times more likely to be in a motor vehicle crash after drinking, and 10 times more likely to have been in a physical fight after drinking.

Drinking at earlier ages is also associated with higher rates of drinking later in life. In fact, 40 percent of those who started drinking before 15 meet criteria for alcohol dependence at some time in their lives.

## **Myth:**

*If I'm old enough to go to war, I should be old enough to drink?*

**Fact:** Many rights have different ages of initiation. You can get a hunting license at age 12, drive at 16, vote and serve in the military at 18, serve in the U.S. House of Representatives at 25, and serve as the U.S. President at 35. Other regulated rights include the sale and use of tobacco, and legal consent for sexual intercourse and marriage. Vendors, such as car rental facilities and hotels, also have set the minimum age for a person to use their services—25-years-old to rent a car and 21-years-old to rent a hotel room.

And these minimum ages are set for a reason. In the case of alcohol, 21 is the minimum age because a person's brain does not stop developing until his or her early to mid-20s. Drinking alcohol while the brain is still developing can lead to long-lasting deficits in cognitive abilities, including learning and memory.

Alcohol use by those under 21 is also related to numerous health problems including injuries and death resulting from alcohol poisoning, car crashes, suicide, homicide, assaults, drowning and recreational mishaps. Not to mention that the early onset of drinking by youth significantly increases the risk of future health problems such as addiction.

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## MYTH VS. FACT

### **Myth:**

*Europeans let their kids drink at an early age, yet they do not have the alcohol-related problems we do.*

**Fact:** This popular myth, which is referred to as the “European Myth”, was dispelled by the facts of the 2003 European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs and the United States 2003 Monitoring the Future report.

What was discovered is that in most European countries, young people have higher intoxication rates than in the United States, and less than a quarter had lower or equivalent rates to the United States.

Also, a greater percentage of young people in a majority of European countries report binge drinking at higher rates than compared to their US counterparts. And that some European youth have higher rates of alcohol-related problems because of their heavy drinking.

Perhaps the best example of fact versus myth when it comes to the “European Myth” is a look at what happened in New Zealand. In 1999, New Zealand lowered its purchase age from 20 to 18. Not only did drunk driving crashes increase, but youth started to drink earlier, binge drinking escalated, and in the 12 months following the decrease in legal drinking age, there was a 50 percent increase in intoxicated 18- and 19-year-old patients at the Auckland Hospital emergency room.

Clearly, Europe has serious issues with youth alcohol use.

### **Source:**

[www.why21.org](http://www.why21.org)

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### **Myth:**

*Drinking is just a phase all kids go through; they'll grow out of it.*

**Fact:** Many don't grow out of it. Those who start drinking before they're 21 are more likely to drink more later in life versus those who do not drink until they are 21. And, they continue this pattern through their 20s.

And while we wait for them to “grow out of it”, they're: dying in car crashes (an average of eight American youth under age 21 die every day in alcohol-related crashes); getting hurt in accidents such as falls, burns, and drowning; contracting sexually transmitted diseases; becoming teenage parents; committing crimes (physical assault, sexual assault, vandalism, robbery, theft, homicide, etc.); becoming physical and sexual assault victims; and costing society a considerable amount of money.

### **Myth:**

*Lowering the drinking age will encourage young people to be responsible consumers and drink under supervision at bars (or on college campuses) rather than at uncontrolled, private parties.*

**Fact:** While many bars serve alcohol legally and responsibly, many bars encourage irresponsible drinking with happy hours, two-for-one specials and bar crawls. Many also serve obviously intoxicated patrons. On college campuses, fraternity and sorority members drink more frequently than their peers and accept high levels of alcohol consumption and associated problems as “normal”.

Youth drink with the goal to get drunk. They are not “wired” in the brain to assess risk and to be responsible when it comes to risky behavior. There is no class or situation that will prompt a teen to drink responsibly when alcohol flows freely.