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Legal Drinking Age Debate

Regional Prevention Services (RPS) is a regionally-based system, funded by the Colorado Department of Human Services; Division of Behavioral Health and administered by OMNI Institute.

For more resources and to find out how to contact the Regional Prevention Consultant (RPC) in your region, visit www.rpscolorado.org

In 1984 Congress passed the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, which imposed a penalty of 10% of a state's federal highway appropriation on any state setting its drinking age lower than 21.

In July 2008, a group of over 100 university chancellors and presidents launched the Amethyst Initiative. This group of higher education leaders propose the drinking age be lowered, signing off on a public statement "that the problem of irresponsible drinking by young people continues despite the minimum legal drinking age of 21, and there is a culture of dangerous binge drinking on many campuses" (www.amethystinitiative.org).

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The Amethyst Initiative has been successful in their call for “informed and unimpeded debate on the 21 year-old drinking age” (www.amethystinitiative.org) as it has prompted local and nationwide discussion on the benefits and consequences of the current drinking age. Here are just a few considerations from both sides of the discussion:

Consideration 1:

One argument in favor of lowering the drinking age is that Europeans have less alcohol-related problems because they have a lower drinking age. However, this statement is largely anecdotal. A recent study shows that in the majority of the European countries, more young people have engaged in binge drinking (5 or more drinks in one setting) in the last 30 days than young people in the U.S. A lower drinking age does not necessarily mean a reduction of high risk drinking and associated behaviors (PIRE, 2006).

Consideration 2:

On the other hand, while it is true that alcohol related highway accidents amongst 18-21 year olds declined when the minimum drinking age went to 21, there is some debate on the extent to which the drinking age is responsible. Other contributing factors include the introduction of a “designated driver” concept, increased enforcement, and vehicle safety improvements (National Hwy Safety Patrol).

Consideration 3:

Brain development is another consideration. Current “research reveals that adolescents are more vulnerable than adults to the effects of alcohol on learning and memory and it clearly indicates that delaying the use of alcohol reduces the risks of harming the developing brain, a developmental process that continues into the early 20’s”(Drug Free Alliance, 2008).



Informed debate and ongoing review of policies are valuable tools for keeping prevention approaches current and relevant. The following resources can help inform an educated and active conversation:

History of minimum drinking age laws

http://alcoholpolicy.niaaa.nih.gov/index.asp?SEC={DA5E054D-FB8E-4F06-BBBC-6EED9F37A758}&Type=B_BASIC

In favor of lowering the drinking age

www.amethystinitiative.org

www.chooseresponsibility.org

Against lowering the drinking age

<http://www.drugfreeactionalliance.org/documents/21WITHcitations.pdf>

<http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/09/29/nelson.retain.drinking.age/>

http://www.pire.org/external/documents/Newsroom/Editorial_DrinkingAge.pdf

<http://www.cnn.com/2009/US/09/29/nelson.retain.drinking.age/index.html?iref=24hours>

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