Letters to the Editor

The Effect of the Law on Underage Drinking and Driving

Roeper and Voas contend unequivocally that restoring 21 years as the minimum legal drinking age has reduced underage drinking and driving.1 There are, however, reasons for doubting that laws that raised the drinking age are responsible for improved traffic safety.2,3

Roeper and Voas's own nighttime weekend roadside survey data from one South Carolina and two California communities provide additional reason for doubt. The authors found that, compared with older drivers, drivers younger than 21 years reported a significantly greater frequency of having 6 or more drinks in a day.

Thus, the group for whom drinking was the "forbidden fruit" under law was the group that most frequently drank heavily. It is plausible that by curtailing legal opportunities for young people to obtain alcoholic beverages, minimum drinking age laws inadvertently encourage youth to binge rather than drink responsibly on those occasions when they succeed in obtaining alcoholic beverages. Does denying young people opportunities for exposure to responsible convivial drinking reduce their tendency to drink without bingeing later in life? The correct answer may be yes.7,9

Roeper and Voas found that drivers younger than 21 years were, in spite of their more frequent reports of heavy drinking, less likely than older drivers to test positive for blood alcohol concentration (BAC) (BAC ≥ 0.01%). They declared that "drivers younger than 21 years are more successful than drivers in other age groups in separating drinking from driving."1(p757) How can this finding be attributed to laws designed to deter all drinking in this younger age group? It's more plausibly attributed to the California law that allows immediate license suspension for those younger than 21 who are found to be driving with a BAC as low as one tenth of the legal threshold applied to older drivers. Drivers younger than 21 years may be more careful than older drivers about avoiding drinking when they drive, because the law discriminates against them and because of the severe consequence of violating the law. It would be illuminating to investigate whether there is as much separation of drinking from driving where there is no age discrimination in laws on permitted BAC levels for drivers as there is in California. However, we should also be vigilant for unintended adverse consequences of age discrimination as public policy. The important ends of reduced drunk driving and improved traffic safety do not justify attempting any means to achieve them.7

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References