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### **“Why 21?” The Debate Continues**

Seems like every few years, the debate about whether or not to keep the drinking age at 21 comes to the surface. Some would prefer to go back to the Prohibition Days, while others want to lower or eliminate the drinking age, rationalizing it will teach kids to drink responsibly. While these points may seem to make sense to most of us, we also need to look at all the facts before we decide to change the Minimum Legal Drinking age (MLDA) laws.

A little history first--In the 1920's the “Prohibition Act” became law, banning any sort of alcoholic drink for anyone. This created an outpouring of bootlegging and illegal activity to smuggle alcohol into homes and businesses. Later, when the Prohibition Act was repealed, the MLDA was set at age 21. In the late 1970's, during the Vietnam era, the MLDA was lowered again and states were allowed to choose the drinking age—most chose 18 or 19. According to a study from the Journal of Legal Studies, “state motor vehicle fatality data from the 48 continental states found that lowering the MLDA for beer from 21 to 18 during the 1970s resulted in an 11% increase in fatalities among this age group.” In 1984, the federal government gave states the choice—either raise the MLDA back to 21 by 1986 or risk losing the state's federal highway funding. All states eventually conceded to this.

According to the America Journal of Preventative Medicine, “the current drinking rate during the previous month among persons aged 18 to 29 declined significantly from 59% in 1985 to 40% in 1991, coincident with states' adopting an age 21 minimum legal drinking age.” There was also a median 16% decline in motor vehicle crashes as the states increased the MLDA.

An article from Minimum-Drinking-Age Laws also shows “the behavior of 18-year-olds is particularly influential to youth ages 15-17, as young people typically imitate the practices of those who are slightly older, rather than the practices of those significantly older.” Therefore, if 18-year-olds can legally drink, their immediate, younger peers will drink too.

In short, the MLDA has saved an estimated 900 lives per year since the mid 1980's, not only in motor vehicle crashes but other alcohol-related fatalities. Youth often lack the sound decision making skills that an adult has acquired, proven by brain scan image testing. While sometimes it feels like society is imposing an almost impossible law on youth, the data shows how it would be worse if the law was changed or repealed.