

Impact of the Change in the 18-Year-Old Drinking Age on College Students

The 21-year-old drinking age has become familiar to the point that it becomes easy to forget how recent of a development it is. It has its roots in 1984, when President Ronald Reagan, under pressure from advocacy groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), signed the Minimum Drinking Age Act into law. The Act came about through a loophole. Because it would violate the rights of the states to enforce a national drinking age, the law relied on incentives. As such, the law incentivized states to change their drinking age to 21 with the threat of a 10% cut to their federal highway funds. This initially led to a slight drop in binge drinking (Serdula, Brewer, Gillespie, Denny, Mokdad, 2003). From 1985 to 1999 the overall rate of binge drinking fell 3.3%, with the greatest decline (7.3%) occurring among 18-to 20-year olds.

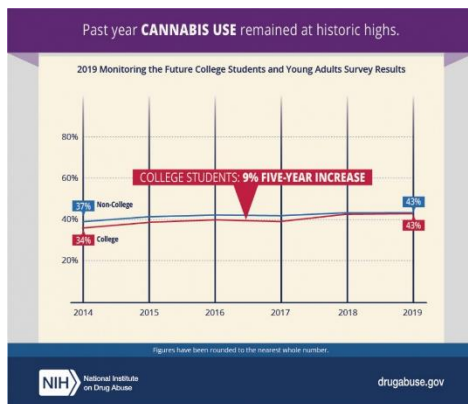
Yet, even with this, binge drinking has remained an issue that disproportionately affects college-aged youth. A 2005 study (Slutske, 2005) showed that 18% of college students in the U.S. had suffered problems related to alcohol within the past year. This was 3 percentage points higher than their peers who did not attend college. In short, despite the fact that the rates of binge drinking, and underage drinking fell slightly after the drinking age was raised to 21, they still demonstrated a problematic reality about the lives of college students.

The years after 2005 gave rise to another trend: the gradual legalization of marijuana on the state level and the greater social acceptance of the substance that came with it. Arguably the most prominent development towards this end came in 2012, when Colorado voters passed Amendment 64, legalizing the possession and sale of marijuana for recreational purposes (Colorado State Constitution, 2012). In the years following, a number of states followed suit and initiatives to legalize both medical and recreational marijuana gained traction. As of 2021, 16

states, Washington D.C., and two U.S. Territories have legalized recreational marijuana and 35 states have approved medical marijuana (Rense, 2021).

Alongside this wellspring of legalization and decriminalization has come greater cultural acceptance of marijuana as well as an increased rate of usage, particularly among college-aged youth. This fact has interesting implications when placed in the context of the aforementioned problem with binge drinking. The studies conducted regarding these concerns have primarily focused on the prevalence of alcohol abstinence, the rate of marijuana use itself, and the co-use of marijuana and alcohol.

The two most intriguing trends to emerge from these studies were an increase in marijuana use and an increase in alcohol abstinence. According to a study by the University of Michigan and Texas State University (McCabe, Arterberry, and Dickinson, 2020), alcohol abstinence among college students increased from 20% in 2002 to 28% in 2018. Alongside the increase in abstinence came a notable decrease in alcohol addiction, with the rate of alcohol use disorder in 2018 being about half of what it was in 2002. With this decrease in alcohol use and



addiction came an increase in marijuana use. According to the same study, marijuana use among both college students and non-college students aged 18-22 increased from roughly 33% in 2002 to 37% in 2018. A third statistic, regarding the co-use of marijuana and alcohol, reported a 6% increase in the same time interval (Romero,

2020).

Some may consider these findings (decrease in binge drinking with rise in marijuana use) a positive. However, the long-term effects of marijuana use remain unknown. What we do know

is that marijuana affects brain development. When people begin marijuana use as teenagers, the drug may impair thinking, memory, and learning functions linked to how the brain builds connections for these functions.

A recent study involving researchers in both New Zealand and the US (as longer-term effects could be studied in New Zealand due to legalization at an earlier time than seen in the US) found that people who started smoking marijuana heavily in their teens lost an average of eight IQ points between the ages of 13 and 38. The lost cognitive abilities did not fully return for those who stopped use as adults (2012).

A second study on twins who used marijuana showed a significant decline in general knowledge and verbal ability (equivalent to a four-point IQ difference) between pre-teen and early adulthood years.

What we do know is that there has been an increase in marijuana usage that has correlated both with an increase in alcohol abstinence and co-use of marijuana and alcohol. When these statistics are placed alongside those reporting the steady decrease in binge drinking, a pattern becomes clear. Since the drinking age has been lifted to 21 and since initiatives for marijuana legalization have gained traction, there has been a decided decrease in alcohol use among the youth in favor of marijuana use.

In sum, these statistics demonstrate that there has been an increase in marijuana usage that has correlated both with an increase in alcohol abstinence and co-use of marijuana and alcohol. When these statistics are placed alongside those reporting the steady decrease in binge drinking, a pattern becomes clear. Since the drinking age has been lifted to 21 and since initiatives for marijuana legalization have gained traction, there has been a decided decrease in alcohol use among the youth in favor of marijuana use.

In light of these developments, a number of concerns still remain over whether raising the legal drinking age to 21 has even had the positive ramifications that have been touted by its supporters. Advocates such as John McCardell Jr., former president of Middlebury College and the University of the South (Sewanee), have argued that keeping the drinking age at 21 has not resulted in a net benefit (McCardell, Jr. 2012). McCardell, Jr. argues that it would be far more beneficial to adopt practices such as issuing learner's permits to 18-year-olds, which would allow them to drink while still having some form of accountability. He argues that trends that have remained in spite of the raising of the drinking age to 21, such as the continued problem of binge drinking among college students, may have their root in the fact that the current system infantilizes those under 21. As he puts it, these college-aged students are aware that "a law perceived as unjust, a law routinely violated, can over time breed disrespect for law in general."

In sum, the decades since the raising of the drinking age have borne witness to a myriad of intriguing trends among college students. Binge drinking, while still an existent problem, has generally decreased. Marijuana has begun to overtake alcohol as the substance of choice, in part correlating with an increase in abstinence from alcohol use. Advocates have continued to question the effectiveness of the current drinking age.

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