Drinking Age Laws: Fifteen Years in Review

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AIMS OF THE STUDY

The New York State Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services (OASAS) conducted a fifth Youth Alcohol Survey in 1996 to examine the long-term impact of the 21 drinking age law and the trends of underage drinking and drinking-driving. Some specific issues addressed by this study included:

1. the degree to which the 21 drinking age law had an immediate impact on alcohol-related behaviors among the underaged;
2. the extent to which the 21 drinking age law exerted a long-term impact on alcohol-related behaviors among the underaged;
3. the degree to which the 21 drinking age law helped to reduce drinking-driving practices among the underaged; and
4. the extent to which the 21 drinking age law affected other substance abuse behaviors.

METHODS


These surveys were based on a three-stage stratified proportionate random sampling procedure. The 1982, 1983, 1985, and 1986 respondents were contacted by an independent survey firm through a computer-generated random digit-dialing technique. The 1996 survey drew a random sample from a frame of complete listings of household phone numbers. Sample size and target county selections were based on acceptable levels of sampling errors: ± 3 percent in 1982 and 1983, and ± 2 percent in 1985, 1986, and 1996.

The five surveys employed a similar instrument. The first survey interviewed 1,811 16- to 20-year-old New Yorkers living in households. Anonymous telephone interviews were conducted in November 1982 before New York raised its minimum legal purchase age for alcoholic beverages from 18 to 19 years effective December 4, 1982. A second sample was interviewed...
in December 1983 (N = 1,798), approximately one year after the new drinking age went into effect. A third sample of the same design was interviewed in November 1985 (N = 2,757), approximately three years after the 19 drinking age went into effect and one month before the enactment of the 21 drinking age law. A fourth wave was carried out in November 1986 (N=2,756), about one year after the 21 drinking age law went into effect. A fifth survey was conducted in February 1996 (N=2,005), a decade after the 21 drinking age was enacted.

The current analysis does not include youths from New York City. The strata of the sampling procedure were determined by county population and youth alcohol-related crash rates. Compared with other counties, New York City counties generally have higher youth population and lower youth crash rates; the uniqueness of New York City counties requires a separate study on the issue of youthful drinking and drinking-driving.

FINDINGS

Preliminary analysis of the 1996 survey, together with the four other surveys, suggests that both the 19 and 21 drinking age laws had immediate impact on alcohol purchase and use by the targeted youth groups.

➢ A decade later, the effectiveness of the 21 drinking age law continues. Alcohol purchase was down by 70 percent for 19- and 20-year-olds as compared to 1985. In addition, the prevalence of underage alcohol purchase in 1996 is at an all-time low since 1982.

➢ Immediately following the raise in drinking age to 21, alcohol use among 18-, 19-, and 20-year-olds dropped by up to 25 percent. Ten years later, the decrease was even larger, up to 59 percent.

➢ Although the drinking age law did not particularly target the 16 and 17 age groups, their alcohol purchase and use rate also significantly declined between 1982 and 1996.

➢ After raising the drinking age, perceived parental approval of underage drinking has considerably decreased. In 1996, less than 30 percent of respondents reported that their parents would approve of underage drinking, compared to as much as 82 percent in 1982. However, perceived peer approval of underage drinking has not changed; in 1996, up to 80 percent of underage respondents reported that their peers would approve of their alcohol use.

➢ Findings indicate that, both right after the raise in drinking age and over the long-term,
weekend drinking and heavy weekend drinking decreased. However, while fewer youths reported drinking at home in 1996, more than 30 percent of 19- and 20-year-old respondents indicated drinking alcohol at friends' houses.

- Although the drinking age laws substantially reduced purchase and use of alcohol by underage youths, close to half of the interviewed youths did not think that they would be caught when purchasing alcohol illegally, nor did they believe that the punishment would be very severe even if they were caught. Correspondingly, a relatively large proportion of youth respondents, especially older youths (25% of 19- and 20-year-old respondents), reported having used alcohol in bars, restaurants, and other establishments where alcohol was available.

- By 1996, the self-reported drinking-driving rates reduced by half for 19- and 20-year-olds, compared to those in 1985 before the enactment of the 21 drinking age law. The most impressive reduction was for the 18-year-olds: 84 percent from 1982 to 1996.

- Data, however, also indicate that a large proportion of the respondents have been involved in drinking-driving by riding in a vehicle with an impaired driver; in 1996, up to 28 percent of the surveyed youths reported having been in a car driven by someone under the influence of alcohol, and 15 percent reported having been in a car driven by a marijuana-impaired driver.

- Compared to the change in alcohol use, the reduction in cigarette use was relatively small between 1982 and 1996. The use of marijuana, however, dramatically increased -- up by almost 120 percent for 18-year-olds.

**DISCUSSION**

Results of this study clearly show that continued enforcement of the 21 drinking age law will maximize its effect in reducing underage purchase and use of alcohol. Enforcement efforts may concentrate on the following areas:

Parental guidance should be incorporated as a critical component in the strategies to reduce underage drinking and drinking-driving. Law enforcement agencies need to work closely with parents in strengthening the enforcement of the 21 drinking age law, providing parents with the latest trends in youth alcohol/drug use and getting them involved in the development of intervention/prevention strategies; well-informed parents can more effectively supervise their children. All school and community-based programs targeting underage drinking and drinking-
driving should involve participation of parents. Parent-Teacher Associations should be utilized to enable active communications among school officials, community leaders, and parents; thus, parents can increase their supervision if they are informed of any alcohol/drug problems of their children in and out of school.

Media campaigns should be launched to target the perception of «coolness» of illegal alcohol use among the underaged; clear no-use messages need to be sent to youths to dampen the impact of peer pressure for illegal alcohol use. Furthermore, anti-drinking-driving campaigns such as «friends don’t let friends drive drunk» should not only target adult party/bar goers but also target underage youths. The recent passage of the «Zero Tolerance» law provides additional leverage to enforce the 21 drinking age law. Alcohol and other drug agencies, law enforcement agencies, and school communities should take this opportunity to work together to further reduce youths’ risks of involvement in alcohol use and highway crashes. At the same time, the processes of youth involvement in driving drunk and riding with drunk drivers requires more in-depth analysis, so that more effective strategies can be developed to combat underage drinking-driving.

Findings from this report tap a recent issue regarding the impact of the drinking age law on college students. Recent studies note that alcohol use among college students (as much as 75 percent of whom are under 21) has remained unchanged even after the raise of the drinking age, and binge drinking is rampant on college campuses (see Wechsler et al., 1994). Results from this study suggest that the difference in the attitudes towards underage drinking between parents and peers may partially explain the high rates of illegal alcohol use on college campuses. Parental supervision tends to curb underage alcohol use, and peer pressure encourages underage drinking. Away from home and without parental supervision, college students have a higher risk of being involved in underage drinking and such alcohol-related behaviors as drinking-driving.

OASAS initiated college-specific programming efforts in 1983; its Regional College Alcohol Consortia Project helps campus- and community-based prevention program planners address the issue of collegiate alcohol and other drug use. The Regional Consortia are comprised of representatives from local colleges, universities, councils on alcoholism and other drug abuse, and other service providers located throughout New York State. OASAS has begun a new project entitled «Underage Drinking and Traffic Safety Among College Students in New York State.» This project will be carried out in two phases: Phase 1 will examine the motives, patterns, conditions, and consequences of alcohol use and drinking-driving among college students; at Phase 2, with the critical knowledge obtained from the project, we will collaborate with the Regional College Consortia to develop prevention/intervention programs that are specifically targeted for college students.