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Lowering the Drinking Age Is Unlikely to Curb College Binge Drinking, New Study Finds

Although presidents at some U.S. colleges have argued that lowering the minimum legal drinking age could help curb binge drinking on campuses, a new study in the January issue of the Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs suggests such a measure would be ineffective.

In 2008, a group of college presidents and chancellors formed the Amethyst Initiative, a call to rethink the current minimum legal drinking age of 21. They argue that the law encourages underage college students to drink at parties, where binge drinking is common. The main argument states that if students as young as 18 could legally drink in bars and restaurants, they might instead learn more-moderate drinking habits, which could then lead to less binge drinking on college campuses.

So far, 135 college presidents have signed the Initiative's public statement urging lawmakers to reconsider the legal drinking age.

But to simply lower the drinking age without an understanding of its effects would constitute a "radical experiment," said Richard A. Scribner, M.D., M.P.H., of the Louisiana State University School of Public Health, one of the researchers on the new study.

So Scribner and colleagues at BioMedware Corporation in Ann Arbor, MI, and other institutions used a mathematical model to estimate the effects that a lower drinking age would have on college binge drinking.

The model, developed based on survey data from students at 32 U.S. colleges, aimed to evaluate the "misperception effect" emphasized by the Amethyst Initiative -- that is, the idea that underage students widely perceive "normal" drinking levels to be higher than they actually are and that students would adjust their own habits if they were surrounded by social drinkers rather than binge-drinking party-goers.

Overall, the researchers found that the campuses that were most likely to see a decline in binge drinking from a lowered legal drinking age were those that had the poorest

enforcement of underage drinking laws -- being surrounded, for instance, by bars that do not check identification -- and a significant level of student misperception of "normal" drinking (that is, students thinking that the average fellow student drinks much more than he or she actually does). If misperception levels were not present or were at the levels shown by the survey data, these campuses would likely see more binge-drinking if the legal age were lowered.

On "drier" campuses, the study found, student misperceptions would have to be even greater.

"The higher the level of enforcement of underage drinking laws, the higher the level of misperception would have to be for the Amethyst Initiative to have any hope of being effective," explained lead researcher Dr. Jawaid W. Rasul, of BioMedware Corporation. "The misperception effect would have to be extremely large."

And without data supporting the existence of such high levels of student misperception, Rasul said, lowering the legal drinking age would be unlikely to curb college binge drinking.

Scribner also pointed out that lowering the drinking age would not only affect college students but all currently underage young adults. And past research has suggested that when alcohol becomes more readily accessible to young people, alcohol-related problems, such as drunk driving, go up.

Journal Reference: 1. Jawaid W. Rasul, Robert G. Rommel, Geoffrey M. Jacquez, Ben G. Fitzpatrick, Azmy S. Ackleh, Neal Simonsen, Richard A. Scribner. Heavy Episodic Drinking on College Campuses: Does Changing the Legal Drinking Age Make a Difference? *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 2011; 72 (1): 15-23 [link]