

Drinking & Driving Ages

The drinking age has varied a bit from one time and place to another, but not much, I think, except between 18 and 21. Contrary to the trend to standardize the age, at the higher end of 21, a suggestion to lower the drinking age, has gained some following. There usually is a time lag between cause and effect, so it might be hard to tell whether there is a correlation between the appearance of binge drinking, and the enactment of the national 21-year-old drinking age. I guess it's a chicken–n-egg question, but the restriction must be one cause of the problem.

Drinking Age

Having reached the verge of independence, most young people are anxious to get out, into the world. With the slightest encouragement, they will conform to some degree of limitation, in most areas of behavior, but because of the prohibition, teen drinking is only observed by peers, and, therefore, insulated from the disapprobation which might rein in binging and other stupid behavior, associated. Unfortunately, all other activities are connected to drinking; public dining, celebrations, time off, business meetings and dating. By depriving college age people of this time honored avenue into polite society, we delay their graduation from the tribal, dorm society. They can't learn moderation in an environment where they never see it and where there's no incentive to practice it.

When a prohibition is lifted, it's felt as liberation. The thing itself, is irrelevant. It's the freedom which is desirable — and the sudden rush of freedom is expressed in excess. The link between drinking and personal freedom, in the minds of late-teens could be broken by simply allowing it at a younger age, carefully decided upon, considering the consensus of medical opinion.

Introducing alcohol in the home, prior to the legal age for public drinking, would damp down the sudden rush felt when a certain threshold age had been attained.. If it were legal to drink at 17, in the presence of a legal guardian, it would not seem like such a symbol of liberation, to do so, among friends, later on, or, therefore, like a reason to over-indulge. If the legal age for unsupervised drinking were 17, just that one year before graduation, would muffle the 'ya-hoo' effect, and give those who might drink, more reason for patience, by holding out the promise of legal access to alcohol, four years sooner than 21. For most people, eighteen also co-incides with the beginning of college, when many enter that rather insular campus environment. Asking them to wait any longer is unrealistic, and everyone should have a full year of learning about alcohol and it's effects on them, while they can still be supervised.

The thrill of suddenly becoming "legal" is dangerous. Lowering the escape velocity from the prohibition, would de-couple it, in the minds of many young adults, from wild behavior. They might find it easier to realize that, if they must do something dangerous, as they're likely to, anyway, it's better to do it sober, and, because the courage, so often generated by alcohol, betrays reason, some of that risky behavior might get that extra, critical moment of consideration.

Driving Age

Scanning my memory, unofficially, I find that most car accidents caused by young drivers, occur with more than one passenger, and frequently more than two. This impression is gathered over a long time, and without intentionally having tried to observe a correlation. I have witnessed two such accidents, but they are just as likely to represent the majority of cases, as not. In the presence of distractions, even the most critical responsibilities can be momentarily overlooked. Certainly, the power of young people to concentrate is not at issue, but a bigger group is a bigger distraction, and younger people are just more inclined to travel in packs. It's probably also true that young men are far more dangerous than women, on this count, as they are on every other. I think insurance companies have traditionally thought their highest risk to be men under 25.

Official statistics can sort all of these questions out, so that laws can be adjusted to every reality of driving safety, like age, gender and personal history. After examining all factors, it might seem sensible to create some new restrictions on driving. Men under a certain age, could be limited to one passenger, unless one of them is in his immediate family. Rather than just make an age limit, it might make more sense to impose that restriction on men who aren't married, until they have had their licenses for two or three years, whatever age that might mean, once an ideal age has been decided upon. I would not include brothers as "immediate family". No matter how close they may be, brothers still see each other as "guys", who, by definition, are obliged to take wild risks, for the sheer sake of it, and to share the risks taken by other guys, for no other reason than to be a "guy".

The bicycle is the ideal way of getting around a college campus. Most campuses are a square half-mile or two and situated on flat terrain. In that environment, a bike does not require the kind of exertion which musses you up too much to go indoors and function without feeling damp and giving olfactory offense. 1) Using the gears and coasting will get you there, fast, clean and rested. 2) a) Walking the bike up moderate inclines, is no slower or more taxing than walking without it. They weigh less than thirty pounds and they're on wheels. b) On steep hills, walking the bike, is not much slower than riding it, and less taxing. c) You won't need to go downhill to make up for what little you lose. On level ground, you'll make up for your uphill loss, in spades. 3) Many people use roller skates and skateboards just for fun. On a campus, they will cover any distance you need to, stress free and quickly.

Many universities are near towns where there is less to do than on campus, except that there are bars. A car is useless unless you want to go to another city. If you plan to drink too much, plan to walk. It's slower than biking, but the fall is not as hard and might not occur in traffic.

Changing Both Ages

I think 16 is pretty standard for a driver's license. Where the drinking age is 21, that leaves a five year gap between legal driving and legal drinking, which makes no sense except as a dare to young people to drive drunk. It was only because so many jurisdictions used to have a lower drinking age, that virtually everyone did not commit a felony at the wheel, between the ages of 16 and 21.

A law cannot be enforced if a large percentage of people cannot consistently abide by it. Anyone must resent an overweening attempt at suppressing a commonplace activity. Some will just

ignore it, but worse, yet, is the effect it has on people who would rather be law biding. Many will find it hard to obey all the time, and, if it ever seems impossible to obey it, eventually even they will adopt the attitude, 'why ever try'?! A five year gap between driving and drinking, is lamer than no law because those who might not drive intoxicated, otherwise, will do so just to express their scorn for a law which bates them to break it!

Except for those who just don't care for alcohol, five years is too long to hold out against the sacred Western custom of drinking, with a license in your pocket. Sixteen is too young for an unconditional license, anyway, and, at that age, given the choice, many people would prefer drinking to driving, if only for the buzz, which cars can't supply. Most people do not see the car as entertainment, in itself, but merely as a means to an end, taking you where you'd rather be. Often as not, that's where booze is.

If the drinking age were lower than the driving age, the novelty of being "legal", would have time to wear off, before drinking and driving could be mixed. Even under the influence of the 'Ya-Hoo!' factor, commensurate with reaching drinking age, very few would risk the penalties for illegally operating a vehicle, which should surely include a five year delay in getting a license. The penalties for lending a car to someone without a license would be severe enough to keep that threat very low. Anyone might get intoxicated, illegally, but, if they can't lay their hands on a two-ton clot of steel, capable of careening around at more than a mile-a-minute, they'd have to be pretty clever to concoct the calibre of catastrophe which can be so quickly accomplished at the wheel of a car.