The drinking age should be 18 because raising the drinking age to 21 hasn’t reduced drinking it has just driven it into hiding. Gabrielle Glaser is the author of the book “Her Best-Kept Secret: Why Women Drink—And How They Can Regain Control.” Glaser discusses in “Return the Drinking Age to 18, and Enforce It” that American citizens under 21 still drink they just do it in more dangerous, underground settings, like “unsupervised high school blowouts and fraternity parties that make ‘Animal House’ look quant.” These dangerous settings for drinking have lead to an explosion in alcohol poisoning deaths that tripled from 1998 to 2005 going from 779 to 2,290 (Glaser). Besides a dangerous increase in alcohol poisoning deaths due to underground drinking Glaser argues that 18 is the age of adulthood for so many other rights of passage, and that it makes no sense that drinking isn’t included here. Glaser points out that at 18 you can vote, marry, buy guns, and join the military. “Why can young adults give their lives for the country or service on a jury, but not have a beer when they come home?” Glaser asks. Glaser’s final point is an important one, “we don’t hand teenagers car keys without first educating them about how to drive.” Education is important, but what does healthy alcohol education look like?

According to “Educating Children about Responsible Alcohol Use” on alcohol.org, which is a website maintained by American Addiction Centers, teaching teenagers how to be responsible while drinking is important. If we educate young drinkers, there is no reason the drinking age shouldn’t be 18. This means discussing and understanding that different drinks have different alcohol content from a beer at 5% to wine at 12% to a shot of distilled spirits at 40% (“Educating...Alcohol Use”). “Educating Children about Responsible Alcohol Use” also highlights that discussing the dangers of driving while drunk is very important, and argues that a safe way to avoid this issue is to offer “the green light to call you anytime for a ride home with no questions asked.” This website also highlights the importance of good modeling of healthy alcohol use by parents. The parental goal here is not to demonize alcohol, but to show safe and responsible alcohol consumption. It is also important for parents to share if alcoholism runs in the family, and to educate that starting to drink very young (before 15) has serious long term consequences like a fivefold increase in the potential for alcohol abuse for that young drinker (“Educating...Alcohol Use”).

Another reason education is important for young drinkers is to avoid binge drinking, which is particularly dangerous. According to “Underage Drinking” from the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, which is an educational website that discusses everything from Covid 19 to alcohol consumption, 90% of underage drinking occurs in the form of binge drinking. According to “Binge Drinking,” which is also on the CDC website, binge drinking is the consumption of 5 or drinks for a man or 4 or more drinks for a woman in about 2 hours. This is important because binge drinking has serious risks from unintentional injuries like falls and car crashes to high costs for the United States as a whole (“Binge Drinking”). Drinking too much costed the US $249 billion in 2010 due to lose of workplace productivity and criminal justice costs, and 77% of this cost was due to binge drinking. These logos argue strongly that lowering the drinking age to 18 would have a positive effect on drinkers because it would reduce binge drinking, which is a particularly damaging form of drinking.

On the other side there are some strong arguments for why the drinking age of 21 is working because it prevents death, arrests, traffic accidents and poor academic performance. According to Chris Carpenter, who is a professor at Vanderbilt University, there is a clear causal chain between drinking and negative consequences like death, which spikes 9% at 21, and arrests which also spike at 21. Alcohol consumption is also tied to psychological distress and poor academic performance (Carpenter). Tara Watson, who is an associate professor of economics, reminds us of the original reason that the drinking age was raised from 18 to 21 in 1984: traffic fatalities. According to a study cited by Tara Watson raising the drinking age to 21 reduces mortality due to driving by 18%. In short the data show a myriad of positive side effects to raising the drinking age. The clear and simple argument is that a drinking age of 21 saves lives.

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