

Prevention Research Center

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Higher beer taxes, 21 drinking age reduces traffic deaths of young people, study finds

Communities with weak existing alcohol-control policies have most to gain

BERKELEY – Communities with few alcohol regulations could consider raising taxes on beer as a way to reduce drunken driving fatalities among young people. Alcohol-control policies such as the minimum legal drinking age and raising beer taxes have helped prevent youth access to alcohol and the problems of underage drinking. However, a recent study found that communities with limited alcohol regulation could expect the greatest benefits from establishing new alcohol-control policies. The effectiveness of any particular policy depends on what other policies are also in place.

“Our findings suggest that communities that have been historically reluctant to regulate alcohol availability currently have the most to gain from implementing any given alcohol policy initiative,” said William R. Ponicki, M.A., lead author of the study and a researcher at PIRE’s Prevention Research Center in Berkeley. “The study confirms earlier findings regarding the importance of alcohol policy in preventing alcohol-related problems such as traffic crashes. But it also shows that a community should look at the whole picture.”

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Researchers examined traffic crash data gathered from 48 U.S. states from 1975 to 2001. Results showed that raising either the drinking age or beer taxes alone led to fewer youth-traffic fatalities. However, the study found that changing the drinking age caused a larger reduction in fatalities when beer taxes were low as opposed to when they were high. Similarly, beer taxes were more effective in reducing youth fatalities in states and years where it was legal for youth to buy and consume beer. When it is *illegal* for youth to buy and consume beer – as it is now in all 50 US states – higher beer taxes have less impact.

Since the 1988, the minimum legal drinking age has been 21 in all 50 States and the District of Columbia. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates drinking age laws save more than 900 lives a year in traffic fatalities alone.

“The more a community regulates alcohol availability, the less additional benefit it might expect to achieve from enacting any new policy initiative,” Ponicki said. “If a given community has very few existing alcohol-policy restrictions, any proposed new restriction could be expected to have a larger impact. If another community already has extremely strong alcohol restrictions, the same proposed new constraint might not be expected to have as much impact.”

“Our findings suggest that some of the varying results across past research may simply indicate that a given public policy may not have the same effectiveness in all places and times,” Ponicki said. “Specifically, a given policy change, such as a 10-percent beer-tax increase, may not give the same ‘bang for the buck’ when implemented in different situations.” Results are published in the May issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*. The study was funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

PIRE (Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation) is a national nonprofit public health research institute, supported primarily by federal and state research and program funds, with centers in seven locations around the country. For more information or to obtain a copy of the published report, contact Michelle Blackston at (301) 755-2444 or mblackston@pire.org.