



[MAIN](#) | [STORIES](#) | [VIDEO](#) | [DATA](#) | [COMMENT](#)

Effort to lower drinking age losing steam?

Support for Amethyst Initiative slows as health professionals blast debate to allow 18-to-20-year-olds to drink.

By [Tonia Moxley](#) | The Roanoke Times

[Prev](#)

Before she died, Ayesha Kathleen Wintersdorff was a rising senior at Blacksburg High School and a DECA officer who worked to feed the hungry in her community.

She was killed just after 4 a.m. on June 28, 2008, after she lost control of her car on U.S. 460 in Blacksburg, crossed the center line and hit a guardrail, according to police reports.

At the time, police declined to say what caused the wreck.

Wintersdorff had earlier attended a gathering hosted by Zachary Daniel Grinnan, then a 21-year-old Blacksburg resident.

Grinnan was convicted this month of contributing to the delinquency of a minor in connection with the crash. He had been accused of supplying the 16-year-old girl with alcohol before the wreck.

There are about 10.8 million underage drinkers in the United States, according to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

And they're not just having one beer.

Nationally, 29 percent of high school seniors, 22 percent of sophomores and 11 percent of eighth-graders reported having consumed five or more drinks on a single occasion, according to the a 2005 study on the institute's Web site.

Video

Under21: Exploring the drinking-age debate

- [Delve into the grey area of the drinking-age debate: Explore the issues, the proponents, the opponents, the science and the social aspects of drinking on college campuses](#)

Interactive

Glossary

- [College drinking has a vocabulary all its own. Delve into the definitions of some of the words that have come up throughout the Under21 series.](#)

And the results are similar in Roanoke County, where about 24 percent of high schoolers reported they had engaged in binge drinking, according to the 2008 Youth Risk Behavior Survey.

"This is an adult problem with a youth consequence," said Nancy Hans, coordinator of the Roanoke County Prevention Council.

"Our biggest challenge is to get parents onboard with this" and talking to their children about alcohol and its risks long before they get to college, she said.

While organizations such as Hans' are focused on reducing dangerous drug and alcohol use by teenagers, Hans fears success by an effort to lower the legal drinking age would only exacerbate the problem.

The Amethyst Initiative — a controversial proposal to combat binge drinking at the college level by relaxing federal funding penalties on states that lower the legal drinking age — has for more than a year pushed the discussion of lowering the legal drinking age to 18.

But the initiative seems to have stalled as health care professionals continue to insist that lowering the drinking age won't solve the problem of college drinking — and will only increase dangerous drinking by younger teens by increasing the availability of alcohol.

The consequences can be severe.

Each year, according to the U.S. surgeon general, about 5,000 people under the age of 21 die as a result of underage drinking. About 1,900 die from motor vehicle crashes, 1,600 from homicide and 300 from suicide. Hundreds more drown or die from injuries sustained in falls or fires.

In fact, excessive alcohol consumption is the third-leading preventable cause of death in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Public health officials and community leaders are struggling to find new ways to address binge drinking, especially among youth.

Enter Amethyst Initiative

Although it has received wide media attention — including a profile on CBS' "60 Minutes" and a March interview on Comedy Central's "The Colbert Report" — the Amethyst Initiative has received limited support since it launched more than a year ago.

According to the organization's Web site, 135 college presidents, including Charles Steger of Virginia Tech, have signed the Web site's statement since 2008.

But the number of signers has remained constant for several months.

In contrast, 660 presidents have signed the American College & University Presidents' Climate Commitment — an anti-global warming initiative — since it was initiated in 2007, and more continue to do so.

A more recent effort of the Choose Responsibility organization is Get Real, which is aimed at getting student government presidents to endorse a lower drinking age.

So far, according to the group's Web site, about 45 student-leaders have signed the petition, including the SGA presidents at George Mason, James Madison and Washington and Lee.

Supporters of the Amethyst Initiative — launched by former Middlebury College President John McCardell, a Washington and Lee alumnus — advocates lowering the legal drinking age from 21 to 18.

"Adults under 21 are deemed capable of voting, signing contracts, serving on juries and enlisting in the military, but are told they are not mature enough to have a beer," according to amethystinitiative.org.

Supporters of the initiative argue the 21-plus drinking age abridges parents' right to teach their children about alcohol and infringes on the rights of 18-year-olds, who have reached the so-called "age of majority."

They further argue the law is unenforceable and breeds disrespect among youth for police.

Most major public health and safety organizations oppose the Amethyst Initiative, including the American Medical Association and Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Among their numerous concerns are the impact of alcohol on still-developing young brains and increasing access to alcohol for students in high school and younger.

MADD was the prime mover in the passage of the National Minimum Drinking Age Act signed into law in 1984 by President Reagan.

The act was passed in the wake of reductions in the drinking age by more than 20 states between 1970 and 1975. Subsequent studies in those states found a corresponding uptick in alcohol-related traffic fatalities among 18- to 20-year-olds.

In fact, today the law is credited with saving about 900 lives every year in traffic crashes alone, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Some supporters of the Amethyst Initiative, including researchers affiliated with the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute in Washington, have called those studies into question. Others say the legal drinking age contributes to binge drinking.

The minimum legal drinking age was never meant to curb binge drinking, and scientifically, there is no link between them, said Alexander Wagenaar, a University of Florida epidemiologist and leading expert in alcohol policies and their effects.

Study after study conducted in various states since the 1970s conclusively prove the law reduces alcohol-related traffic fatalities and injuries among 18- to 20-year-olds by about 13 percent, according to NHTSA data.

"Some studies looked at 'spill-over' effect on 16- to 17-year-olds, and often saw reductions there as well," Wagenaar said.

No other law or policy change implemented in the past 30 years has had such a dramatic life-saving effect, he said.

Lower ages overseas

Similar results can be seen in other countries.

After New Zealand lowered its legal drinking age from 20 to 18 in 1999, a study published in the American Journal of Public Health in 2006 showed "significantly more alcohol-involved crashes occurred among 15- to 19-year-olds than would have occurred had the purchase age not been reduced to 18 years."

In 2002, the New Zealand Alcohol Advisory Council reported increases in unsafe sex practices and traffic accidents among the affected age group.

Reductions in the drinking age in several Australian states in the 1980s resulted in increases in juvenile crime, according to a 2003 study published in the New Zealand Journal of Psychology.

Join the conversation

What's your take?

- [Share your thoughts on the current state of the drinking age -- and where it ought to be. In the meantime, see what other readers have to say about the debate over the issue](#)

Furthermore, studies have shown that allowing 18- and 19-year-olds to drink in bars alongside older drinkers is unlikely to have a moderating effect, as argued by some supporters of Amethyst.

When younger drinkers flooded New Zealand bars, one study showed older drinkers went elsewhere.

Supporters of Amethyst "can make the argument that it's a rights issue" to allow 18-year-olds to drink, Wagenaar said. But the public must realize that right comes at a cost of about 900 lives a year.

Science does point to a way to curb binge drinking among young people, however: Raise the price of alcohol. And the easiest way to do that is to raise taxes, Wagenaar said.

A study of alcohol tax increases over several years in Alaska showed significant reductions in deaths attributed to alcohol-related disease.

Research also suggests that regulating marketing of alcohol in venues popular among young people, such as cable TV, may help.

Since 2001, studies have found that young people with greater exposure to alcohol marketing are more likely to start drinking than their peers.

From 2001 to 2007, the number of alcohol advertisements seen in a year by the average television-watching 12- to 20-year-old increased by 38 percent, according to a study by the Baltimore-based Center on Alcohol Marketing and Youth. The center is affiliated with the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Another stumbling block is under-reporting of the causes of injuries and deaths among young people, said Kathy Graham Sullivan of the Roanoke Area Youth Substance Abuse Coalition.

A lack of details in media reports about the role of substance abuse in these cases — often stemming from privacy concerns — can hinder efforts to educate parents, youngsters and the public about the risks of underage drinking, Sullivan said.

'License to drink'

One part of the Amethyst Initiative has garnered some support, however, even from those who generally oppose rolling back the drinking age.

Hans of the Roanoke County Prevention Council said she cannot condone a lower drinking age, particularly because new research suggests that binge drinking among of those younger than 25 can cause permanent brain damage.

But, the idea of an "alcohol licensing" program similar to driver's education is an intriguing idea, she said.

Under this proposal, alcohol education would be taught in schools by certified instructors. Students seeking a "license to drink" would be required to pass an exam, among other requirements. Any subsequent violations of liquor laws could cause the student to lose that license.

The idea of using an alcohol license to encourage respect for liquor laws might hold some promise, said Steve Clarke of Virginia Tech's Campus Alcohol Abuse Prevention Center.

Imagine being the only one in your group of friends who can't go to the bar because you did something illegal and lost your license, Clarke said.

Still, Clarke said, allowing 18-year-olds to purchase alcohol will likely exacerbate underage and binge drinking problems by putting more alcohol in the hands of teens and even middle schoolers.

Amethyst Initiative primer

An amethyst is a purple gemstone thought by the ancient Greeks to ward off drunkenness. It is also the name given to an initiative to roll back the minimum legal drinking age from 21 to 18.

-- Former Middlebury College President John McCardell launched the Amethyst Initiative in 2008 under the umbrella of the nonprofit chooseresponsibility.org, headquartered in Washington, D.C.

-- To date, 135 college presidents have signed on to support the initiative, which encourages debate on the drinking age.

-- According to 2008 Internal Revenue Service filings, as president of chooseresponsibility.org, McCardell was paid a salary of \$216,000.

-- Chooseresponsibility.org Executive Director Michael Giuliani was paid \$88,461 the same year. Before coming to the organization, Giuliani was chief of staff to former New York Republican U.S. Rep. Sue Kelly and co-founder of the now defunct Majority Accountability Project, a conservative advocacy journalism Web site covering Congress.

Giuliani also worked for the National Republican Senatorial Committee and the Health Insurance Association of America, an advocacy organization promoting private health insurance.

-- 2008 tax filings show chooseresponsibility.org employed eight people and raised \$1.4 million in unspecified grants and donations, up from \$336,971 the previous year.

-- Donors listed on the organization's Web site include the Robertson Foundation, the Achelis Foundation, The Overbrook Foundation, and donations from private individuals across the country. All are based in New York City.

-- According to IRS filings, between 2006 and 2008, the foundations gave a combined total of about \$210,000 to chooseresponsibility.org. Of that total, \$150,000 came from the Robertson Foundation.

-- The Robertson Foundation was founded by New York billionaire Julian Robertson, 77, a retired hedge fund guru, who according to Forbes.com owns golf courses and vineyards in New Zealand. The libertarian-leaning foundation supports charter schools and school voucher programs, religious groups and anti-hunger projects, among other groups. The foundation chooses its own projects, and does not accept unsolicited grant proposals, according to its Web site.

[Next](#)

Updated: Sunday, November 29, 2009 | [About this series](#) | [Credits](#)



THE ROANOKE TIMES
roanoke.com

Copyright © 2009