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# Legal drinking age of 18 tied to high school dropout rate

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Piscataway, NJ - Although there have been calls to lower the legal drinking age from 21, a new study raises the possibility that it could have the unintended effect of boosting the high school dropout rate.

The report, published in the September issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, looked back at high school dropout rates in the 1970s to mid-80s -- a time when many U.S. states lowered the age at which young people could legally buy alcohol.

Researchers found that when the minimum drinking age was lowered to 18, high school dropout rates rose by 4 to 13 percent, depending on the data source. Black and Hispanic students -- who were already more vulnerable to dropping out -- appeared more affected than white students.

The findings do not prove that the 18 drinking age was to blame, according to lead researcher Andrew Plunk, Ph.D., an assistant professor of pediatrics at Eastern Virginia Medical School, in Norfolk. However, he said, state drinking-age policies would likely be unrelated to the personal factors that put kids at risk of drinking problems or dropping out.

Plus, Plunk explained, states made those policy changes based on national trends at the time -- mainly, the belief that with the voting age lowered to 18, the legal drinking age should drop, too. So it's unlikely that other events happening within states would explain the connection to high school dropout rates.

And why would the legal drinking age matter when it comes to high school dropout rates?

"The minimum legal drinking age changes how easy it is for a young person to get alcohol," Plunk said. "In places where it was lowered to 18, it's likely that more high school students were able to get alcohol from their friends."

And for certain vulnerable kids, that access might lower their chances of finishing high school. Policies that allowed 18-year-olds to buy alcohol showed a particular impact on minority students, as well as young people whose parents had drinking problems. In that latter group, the dropout rate rose by 40 percent.

In the mid-1980s, federal legislation returned the legal drinking age to 21 nationwide.

However, there is an ongoing debate about lowering it again -- largely as a way to combat clandestine binge drinking on college campuses. The argument is that college students who can legally buy alcohol at bars and restaurants will drink more responsibly.

But Plunk said that debate is missing something: What might the effects be in high schools?

"I think this study gives us some idea of what could happen if we lower the legal drinking age," Plunk said. "It suggests to me that we'd see this same dropout phenomenon again."

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Plunk, A. D., Agrawal, A., Tate, W. F., Cavazos-Rehg, P., Bierut, L. J., & Grucza, R. A. (September 2015). Did the 18 drinking age promote high school dropout? Implications for current policy. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 76(5), 680-689.

To arrange an interview with Andrew Plunk, Ph.D., please contact Nancy Chapman at ChapmaNM@EVMS.EDU or 757-446-6074.

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