

Yale Ethics Bowl Sample Case

Should the U.S. Lower the Minimum Legal Drinking Age (MLDA)?

Background: In 1984, the U.S. Congress passed the National Minimum Drinking Age Act, requiring all states to raise the drinking age to 21, creating the first national standard for the Minimum Legal Drinking Age (MLDA). Before Prohibition (1920-1933), many states had no laws regarding the legal drinking age. After Prohibition, most states set the MLDA at 21, which was aligned with the voting age at the time. However, following the 26th Amendment in 1971, which lowered the voting age to 18, many states lowered their MLDA to 18 or 19. Today, the U.S. is among 12 countries worldwide with the highest legal drinking age of 21. Meanwhile, 61% of countries have set the drinking age at 18 or 19.

There is an ongoing debate over whether the U.S. should lower the MLDA to 18 or 19, as it was in the 1970s. Proponents of keeping the drinking age at 21 argue that it has improved road safety and saved lives. The CDC highlights a study showing a 16% median decline in motor vehicle crashes in states where the MLDA was raised to 21. The National Highway Traffic Safety Association estimates that raising the drinking age saved 31,417 lives between 1975 and 2016.

On the other side, those who advocate for lowering the MLDA argue that U.S. law already recognizes 18-year-olds as adults, granting them the right to vote and serve in the military. Critics claim it is inconsistent to allow 18-year-olds to fight and die for their country but deny them the right to legally drink alcohol. Some also argue that prohibiting alcohol for 18-20-year-olds increases its allure as a "forbidden fruit" and leads to unsafe drinking habits, especially on college campuses. They assert that legalizing alcohol at 18 would promote responsible drinking under safer, supervised conditions.

Discussion Questions:

1. Is the current MLDA of 21 an imposition on an individual's rights as an adult?
2. How should the government balance the right of autonomy for young adults with the need to protect public safety?
3. Leaving aside its legal status, is it morally wrong to drink underage?
4. What are the significant developmental, social, or ethical differences between the ages of 18 and 21 that could justify different treatment?