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# Constable: Lowering the drinking age could exacerbate issues related to underage consumption of alcohol

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I am writing in response to the editorial in the Austin American Statesman on Wednesday, August 20, 2008 entitled "Drinking Age Debate Would Be Worthwhile - But Drive Slowly." I applaud the college leaders (through the Amethyst Initiative) for looking for ways to address the issue of underage and binge drinking on their campuses. However, the solutions they are proposing are not the best ways to address the this very complex issue. The Amethyst Initiative proposal to lower the drinking age may actually exacerbate issues related to underage drinking.

The Amethyst Initiative is proposing a disastrous proposition of lowering drinking age from 21 to 18. This initiative proposes opening the doors to legal drinking to 18-year-olds who are still in high school. Colleges are no doubt facing serious challenges when it comes to underage drinking, but lowering the drinking age is not the answer. This would only compound the problems. Even if it decreased some burden on colleges, it passes the burden onto the surrounding communities.

In this debate one of the issues that is always mentioned is that alcohol is considered a "forbidden fruit." A common misconception is that when alcohol is no longer forbidden, youth won't "over drink." The fact is that when it is no longer forbidden, youth will simply drink more. Of course, we all hope that young people have been brought up with the values and the moral character to make wise decisions. In some cases, many will, but in others they will not.

Many justify this proposed new drinking age by saying that persons only need to be 16 for a license and only need to be 18 to go to the military and die for their country. Some believe that if you can do those things you should also be old enough to drink beer. However, driving and service in the military have nothing to do with drinking age. Underage drinking is the issue at hand. Minimum ages are set for a reason. Brain research supports the need for the minimum age for drinking alcohol at 21. A person's brain does not stop developing until the mid-20s. Drinking alcohol, while the brain is still developing, can lead to long-lasting deficits in cognitive abilities, including learning and memory.

Alcohol impairs decision-making capabilities; young people who drink are more likely to engage in risky behavior. Risky behavior can lead to unintentional deaths and injuries associated with driving or engaging in other activities that lead to homicide and violence, suicide attempts, sexual assault, risky sexual behavior, and vandalism and property damage. Not to mention that the early onset of drinking by

youth significantly increases the risk of future health problems such as addiction. Drinking at earlier ages is also associated with higher rates of drinking later in life. Underage drinking is our collective responsibility. We must address this issue as a whole and see how we can form partnerships with Universities to address problem drinking. There are many prevention strategies that have been proven to be successful. Research suggests that higher, not lower drinking ages, reduce alcohol consumption and in some cases is associated with a decrease in traffic accidents.

Through coalitions between community organizations and Universities we can develop strategies to address underage and excessive college drinking. I work for a local nonprofit called YouthLaunch in the Youth Partnership for Change (YPC) program that is designed to empower young people to take a leadership role in educating peers, parents, and community members on the dangers and consequences of underage alcohol use. YPC seeks to increase the awareness in Central Texas of underage drinking laws and the mental and physical effects that result from underage alcohol use. To learn more about what youth in our Youth Partnership for Change program are doing to combat this problem, go to [www.youthlaunch.org](http://www.youthlaunch.org). We invite local universities to join the many adults and young people in YouthLaunch who deeply care about this issue and who regularly speak out about the realities about underage drinking.

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