

Op-Ed/Editorials - Legal Drinking Age in Vermont: 70 Miles an Hour?

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In its wisdom, the Iowa legislature recently sent to the Governor of the State a bill to raise the legal speed limit on rural Iowa highways from 65 to 70 miles an hour. The legislators' principal justification for the bill seemed to be that since most of the drivers who used those highways already exceeded the established limit of 65 miles an hour, the speed limit ought to be raised to reflect that fact. Although opponents of the measure offered ample National Highway Safety Administration data pointing to the certainty that the increased speed limit will result in increased fatalities, injuries, and property damage, these consequences did not appear to sway Iowa legislators as much as the fact that raising the limit would bring the Iowa law into greater conformity with the actual behavior of most drivers.

Justifications for the effort in Vermont to roll back the legal drinking age to 18 seem to me to be strikingly similar - and just as wrongheaded. The logic in the Green Mountain State seems to be that since most 18, 19, and 20 year olds in Vermont - and elsewhere - already drink, many of them abusively, it only makes sense legislatively to arrange things so that the legal drinking age and the age at which most late adolescents drink coincide. Ignored, or minimized, is the virtual certainty that this step will increase the incidence of alcohol-related automobile accidents and associated injuries and fatalities involving youthful drinkers, as well as all the other adverse consequences of abusive early drinking. Instead, the Vermont legislators speak of such seemingly irrelevant issues as age discrimination and such undocumented claims as a relationship between legal drinking age and binge drinking rates. The fact is that we don't really know

whether binge drinking by underage drinkers has changed much as a function of the change in legal drinking age early in the 1980s. Nonetheless, it is a principal claim made to justify rolling back the legal drinking age.

There is a certain tidiness to increasing the speed limit in Iowa so that it hews more closely to the speed at which drivers actually drive. There is also tidiness in reducing the legal age at which drinking is allowed in Vermont to bring it closer to the age at which youth actually drink. But one has to ask whether tidiness is a sufficient reason to put Iowa drivers and youthful Vermont drinkers at markedly increased risk?

Actually, there is another far more compelling argument that could be used to justify both these legislative decisions: by minimizing or ignoring the facts that many drivers do not observe a speed limit of 65 miles an hour and many youthful drinkers do not obey the laws governing the age at which they can legally consume alcohol, our society condones law-breaking - and, in so doing, encourages our youth to adopt a selective approach to decisions about the laws they will obey and those they will flaunt. I wish the Vermont and Iowa legislatures had included this politically-incendiary argument in their debates of these issues.

On balance, though, it seems to me that what is most important to consider in taking sides on both these decisions are the empirical data to the effect that the faster people drive, the more likely they are to have serious automobile accidents, and the younger people drink, the more likely they are to suffer a range of consequences because of their drinking, especially their drinking and driving. That is why I am strongly opposed to both of these legislative actions.

What do you think? You can address comments to Dr. Peter Nathan.