

## **Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission**

### **POSITION ON THE LEGAL DRINKING AGE**

**November 2005**

#### **POSITION**

The Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission (AADAC) recognizes the importance of drinking age legislation as an environmental strategy intended to prevent youth from purchasing and consuming alcohol. The Commission also acknowledges that in isolation, drinking age legislation is unlikely to be effective. Research and experience demonstrate that a comprehensive approach incorporating a combination of strategies is required to reduce underage drinking and alcohol-related harms. AADAC is committed to a range of actions that effectively prevent alcohol problems among youth and reduce the risks and negative consequences of alcohol use in all segments of the Alberta population. These actions will encourage personal responsibility and informed decisions about alcohol consumption.

#### **CONTEXT**

In 1971 the legal drinking age (LDA) in Alberta was lowered from 21 to 18 years. This change was part of a broad shift that occurred throughout North America between 1970 and 1975 and favoured more liberal laws and regulations affecting the availability of alcohol. During the 1980s and early 1990s, concerns arose about the use of alcohol by young people. In response to these concerns, all provinces except Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec, raised the legal drinking age to 19.

Recurring debate about raising the legal drinking age in Alberta has stemmed from the belief that doing so will reduce traffic-related injuries and fatalities among teens. Those who advocate maintaining the current LDA emphasize that the key issues of concern are the harmful health and social consequences of alcohol use in the overall population, and the need to promote responsible behaviours among youth; in relation to drinking and driving as well as other alcohol-related risk behaviours.

Underage drinking is relatively common. Provincial surveys indicate that alcohol consumption begins around age 13 and increases as teens get older. Studies from 2002 to 2005 show that between 14 and 40 percent of grade seven students reported drinking alcohol in the past year, while 80 to 90 percent of students in grade 12 reported current consumption. These trends are prevalent across a number of provinces, including those where the legal drinking age is 19 and also in the United States where the LDA is 21.

In 2002, 56.3% of Alberta students (11-19 years of age) reported drinking alcohol at least once in the past year. Prevalence among Alberta students was lower than reported consumption by Ontario students (66.2%) and slightly higher than reported consumption by students in Nova Scotia (51.7%). In both Ontario and Nova Scotia the LDA is 19. Based on findings from the

*Alberta Youth Experience Survey* (TAYES), frequency of alcohol use is linked to the following risk factors: peer behaviour, age, parental approval, school marks, school disconnection, and ease of access to alcohol.

Research on the effects of raising the legal drinking age has produced mixed results. There are studies that indicate a higher LDA leads to a decrease in the use of alcohol by adolescents. There is also strong evidence from the U.S. that raising the LDA leads to a decline in traffic collisions and fatalities among young drivers. However, where such benefits have been demonstrated, they also have been associated with other interventions, including stricter enforcement of legal drinking age laws, increased penalties for impaired driving, implementation of restricted driver's licensing for youth, public awareness, and alcohol education. These findings suggest a combination of strategies that address alcohol use are more effective than approaches that singularly emphasize the control of alcohol purchase and consumption.

Other studies indicate that raising the LDA is not clearly or consistently related to changes in youth drinking (especially heavy or harmful alcohol consumption) or other risk behaviours. Cultural attitudes, parental and community norms, and public education have also been identified as important factors influencing youth behaviour and behaviour change. Comparisons between the U.S. (which has the most restrictive LDA in the world at age 21), and the more liberal policies of countries such as Italy and France (LDA of 16), suggest that drinking-related behaviours among adolescents and young adults in these countries are similar.

There is a common belief that adolescents engage in impaired driving more often than older persons do. However, the data do not support this perception. National statistics show that young drivers are less likely than other age groups to drink and drive, or to have a blood alcohol content (BAC) in excess of 80 mg. (the legal limit). Although teens are less likely to be impaired, they lack experience both with driving and with drinking alcohol. This means that when the two activities are combined, teens are at greater risk for involvement in casualty collisions.

In Alberta, the proportion of fatally injured drivers with BACs over the legal limit declined from 41.1% in 1987 to 33.0% in 2003. Of all fatally injured drivers in Alberta who were legally impaired, 24.0% were aged 20-25; 20.0% were aged 26-35 and 22.7% were 36-45.

Among provinces and territories in Canada, Alberta (17.3%) is second to Saskatchewan (29.0%) in the proportion of adolescent drivers (age 16 to 19) who are fatally injured and have BACs above the legal limit. Rates in Manitoba (8.0%) and Quebec (5.0%) where the legal drinking age is also 18 are considerably lower than in Alberta. Rates in Ontario (5.2%) and British Columbia (3.4%), where the LDA is 19 are much lower than in Saskatchewan. Given that there is no consistent pattern common to provinces with the same drinking age, the argument that a higher LDA will significantly decrease impaired driving fatalities among youth is not clearly supported.

To date, the legal drinking age remains at 18 in Alberta. This is consistent with 35 of 63 other countries that provide information on minimum drinking age laws. Nine countries have no minimum drinking age laws, six countries have LDAs lower than 18, eight have an LDA higher

than 18, and five countries specify an age (ranging from 16 to 25) that depends on the type of alcohol consumed or the location where it is consumed.

## **KEY CONSIDERATIONS**

### **1. *Personal Responsibility***

- The central issue is one of responsibility. Increasing the legal drinking age would penalize an entire group of the population (18 years old) in an attempt to control the behaviour of those adolescents who drink and engage in harmful behaviours such as impaired driving.
- Definition of a minimum legal drinking age involves striking a balance between the goals of safety, community norms and values, and the choices of young people.

### **2. *Multidimensional Response to a Complex Problem***

- While the legal drinking age law is important, it should not be viewed as the singular solution to the complex problem of alcohol use by underage youth.
- Strategies to reduce underage alcohol consumption must be multi-dimensional. Approaches found to be effective in other jurisdictions include a combination of better enforcement of existing laws, raising the legal driving age, increasing excise taxes on alcoholic beverages, liability laws for retailers who sell alcohol to minors, developing school alcohol and drug policies, and public education.
- Graduated licensing systems, which commonly include a low or zero tolerance BAC restriction, have been introduced in several Canadian provinces, including Alberta. These systems reduce traffic collisions among young drivers, particularly when combined with driver education programs.
- To be effective, prevention and harm reduction strategies for underage drinking must engage the genuine support of all those with a stake in the issue: youth, parents, schools, community groups, alcohol retailers and the hospitality industry, law enforcement agencies, and the judicial system.

### **3. *Consistency***

- The age of majority is 18 years of age in all Canadian provinces and territories. A legal drinking age of 19 years creates inconsistency and confusion in defining “adult status.”

### **4. *Unanticipated Effects of Raising the Legal Drinking Age***

- Raising the legal drinking age can encourage and promote increased illegal activities such as bootlegging, binge drinking or drinking in high-risk situations, procuring false identification, and possibly the use of other drugs as substitutes for alcohol.

### **5. *The Broader Issue—Impaired Driving***

Drinking age legislation is intended to control alcohol possession and consumption. Debate on the legal drinking age and underage alcohol use should not focus solely on traffic safety. Nor should a focus on the legal drinking age divert attention from the broader problem of impaired driving, or diminish continuing efforts to reduce alcohol-related crashes among all drivers. For related information, see AADAC's Policy on Impaired Driving and AADAC's Policy on Alcohol.

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