Education on Drinking Responsibly Must Replace Neo-Prohibitionism

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Prohibition, which was repealed in 1933, has made a comeback by targeting young people, who have historically little economic and political influence. While many legislators claim that restrictive laws concerning underage drinking have been successful in lowering traffic fatalities, the statistical data does not bear out these claims. Furthermore, young people are not deterred by MLDA 21 but use fake identification and commit other illegal acts to drink, or start using other drugs. Just as teenagers learn how to drive, they need to learn how to drink responsibly. Just saying “no” is not enough—teenagers need to learn responsible alcohol consumption.

Underlying minimum age legislation are the assumptions of American prohibitionism: alcohol consumption is undesirable and dangerous; it typically results in problem behavior; and drinking in any degree is equally undesirable because moderate social drinking is the forerunner of chronic inebriation. Naturally, young people, if not everyone, should be protected from alcohol, according to this view. However, following the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933, prohibition efforts have largely been age-specific. While repeal abolished Prohibition in general, prohibitionists have tried to maintain their hold over young people. “The youngest age group is . . . chosen as a symbolic gesture because of its political impotence and because . . . there are not major economic consequences . . . .” And there have been no political consequences; young people tend not to vote or otherwise hold politicians accountable for their actions.

Anecdotal statements by students indicated the belief of some that it “might be easier to hide a little pot in my room than a six pack of beer.”

MLDA 21 Has Been Largely Ineffectual

Neo-prohibitionists of today typically argue that raising the drinking age to 21 has been beneficial. However, the evidence suggests a different story. For example, a study of a large sample of young people between the ages of 16 and 19 in Massachusetts and New York after Massachusetts raised its drinking age revealed that the average, self-reported daily alcohol consumption in Massachusetts did not decline in comparison with New York. Comparison of college students attending schools in states that had maintained, for a period of at least ten years, a minimum drinking age of 21 with those in states that had similarly maintained minimum drinking ages below 21 revealed few differences in drinking problems. A study of all 50 states and the District of Columbia found “a