

MARCH

teenVOGUE

BOOZE CONTROL

should the drinking age be lowered?

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A photograph of two Corona beer bottles. The bottle on the left is partially filled with beer and has a head of foam. The bottle on the right is empty and has a brown straw inserted into its neck. Both bottles are condensation-covered and are placed on a crumpled brown paper bag. The background is a plain, light color.

BAR NONE
TWENTY-EIGHT PERCENT
OF HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS
ARE BINGE DRINKERS.

booze control

**Could lowering the drinking age to eighteen help curb binge drinking, drunk driving, and alcohol poisoning?
Photographed by James Wojcik.**

It was no surprise when Colorado State University (CSU) sophomore Samantha Spady started slurring her words and falling down. She'd spent the night before the school's big football game hopping from party to party, downing beer, tequila, and vanilla vodka. Friends of the nineteen-year-old honor student thought she just needed to sleep it off, but the evening after her bender, the former homecoming queen and cheerleader was found in the Sigma Pi frat house, dead of alcohol poisoning. According to the police report, she had as many as 40 drinks in her system, and her blood-alcohol level was more than five times the legal driving limit.

Binge drinking—which, for women, is defined as consuming four or more alcoholic drinks in a row on a single occasion—is a huge concern nationwide. But it's a problem that's hard to take seriously until you hear stories like Samantha's. After all, the prevalence of underage drinking is an open secret, and imbibing until you puke or pass out is practically an American rite of passage, glamorized

by everyone from the characters on *The O.C.* to nostalgic parents. Even girls who don't overdo it with alcohol in high school can get out of control once they go away to college, where there's easy access to liquor and no parental restrictions. Says Cara Vecchiarelli, 20, a CSU junior who often passed Samantha on campus, "A lot of people think, Mom and Dad aren't breathing down our necks anymore, so we can do whatever we want. Let's go drink!"

And so, like Samantha, they do. Within weeks of her death, students at the University of Colorado, Oklahoma University, and the University of Arkansas also died of alcohol poisoning. About 28 percent of high school seniors and more than 2 out of every 5 college students are binge drinkers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and the U.S. Department of Health, respectively. An estimated 3.3 million teenagers are alcoholics. A 2002 study by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's Task Force on College Drinking found that drinking contributes to 1,400 deaths, 500,000 injuries, and 70,000 cases of sexual assault or date rape among 18- to 24-year-olds each year. ►

locking themselves in their dorm rooms and getting drunk. They're binge drinking and trying to get as drunk as possible so their buzz will last while they're at a club where they can't buy alcohol. It leads to all sorts of medical and health risks. If they were allowed to drink, they'd probably go to a bar and have a couple of beers and go home."

Professor John M. McCardell, Jr., who recently retired as president of Middlebury College in Vermont, agrees. He blames the National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984, which established 21 as the legal limit for the purchase and possession of alcohol, for the country's ever-escalating underage problems. "Drinking used to be out in the open and much easier to regulate, but now it has gone underground," he says, adding that this country's

anning a certain group from drinking doesn't mean anything. They are still doing it," says Krystal Werth, a sophomore at the University of Kansas. "They're

"Prohibition culture" makes imbibing exciting precisely *because* it's illegal. McCardell thinks the legal age should be lowered to eighteen to give parents and teachers hands-on opportunities to teach kids about alcohol by openly discussing it—and even drinking it—with them.

Angela Froschl, a seventeen-year-old from Petaluma, California, feels the same way. "The law makes it so teens who drink hide it from their parents, so adults can't regulate what we're doing," she says. "Then

we do things that aren't as safe because we're trying to hide everything, even though our parents could help us learn about alcohol and keep us from abusing it."

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, more than 2,200 people in the U.S. died in traffic accidents involving underage drinking in 2002, and some experts worry that lowering the age might increase alcohol-related accidents. But McCardell argues, "If people are so worried about drunk driving, they should raise the

driving age to 21." Says Krystal, "Eighteen- to twenty-year-olds aren't the only ones drinking and causing accidents. People 21 and older are doing these things, too."

“It's hypocrisy to say that an eighteen-year-old can drive a tank in Iraq but can't handle a glass of wine”

Co-ed drinks herself to death at frat house

By ALY SUJO

A 19-year-old former homecoming queen found dead in a frat house at riot-plagued Colorado State University was drinking heavily before she died over the weekend, officials

task force to look into alcohol abuse on campus. A crackdown on underage drinking at Colorado State led to with camp peltin. And lice pers

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It was not clear whether she continued to drink at the frat house, but published reports said her blood-alcohol level was 0.43 percent, more than five times the legal limit. Spady, a business major at Colorado State, was an honor student, cheerleading captain, homecoming queen and president of her high

FATAL ATTRACTION
THE NEW YORK POST REPORTED ON SAMANTHA SPADY'S DEATH FROM ALCOHOL POISONING LAST SEPTEMBER.

George Hacker, director of the Alcohol Policies Project at the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, D.C., has another concern. "Lowering the drinking age to eighteen would just make it easier for even younger children to start drinking," he says. Of course, younger children are already drinking. According to a federal survey, almost 20 percent of U.S. eighth graders report having been drunk. If eighteen became the legal limit, "a lot of seniors would buy stuff for freshmen and younger kids," says Samantha Melendez, fifteen, from Youngstown, Ohio. "It's already happening, but it would get so much worse."

How bad could it get? "It would be a disaster," warns Richard Yoast, M.D., director of the American Medical Association's Office of Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse in Chicago. "The highest level of diagnosis of alco-

holism is for people in their 20s and 30s. Changing the law would push the whole drinking problem to an earlier age."

In Europe, where the drinking age is typically 16 or 18, alcohol misuse has increased significantly over the past few years. But Cara doesn't think a casual attitude towards drinking necessarily leads to abuse. "My parents would ask me occasionally if I wanted a sip when they had some wine with dinner," she says. "Now alcohol's not a big deal to me. Those with parents who hide the alcohol are the ones who go to college and go, 'Let's drink!'"

"It's hypocrisy to say that an eighteen-year-old's brain is developed enough to drive a tank in Iraq but can't handle a glass of wine," says Alex Koroknay-Palicz, executive director of the National Youth Rights Association, adding that you don't have to

wait until 21 to marry, vote, or sit on a jury. But state governments will lose federal highway funds if they lower the drinking age—so they don't. Krystal thinks the money spent enforcing the law should be spent on alcohol education. "Instead of police trying so hard to give out MIPs and MICs [minor-in-possession and minor-in-consumption charges], they should be trying harder to give out punishments for DUIs [driving under the influence]," she says. Last October, Krystal helped lead a protest of 300 University of Kansas students agitating to decrease the legal drinking age to eighteen. "This is not a matter of trying to have one big party," she says. "This is about people taking the responsibility of being adults." —CARA NISSMAN

What do you think? Should the drinking age be lowered to 18 or remain at 21, and why? E-mail us at vmail@teenvogue.com.

WARNING

lethal dose

HOW TO TELL IF SOMEONE HAS HAD TOO MUCH TO DRINK—AND WHAT TO DO.

Symptoms of alcohol poisoning include: unsteady walking; glassy eyes; trouble focusing; slurred speech; skin that is excessively cold, clammy, red, or pale; vomiting; trouble breathing; un- or semi-consciousness. States have different rules about whether hospitals need to notify the police or your parents if you are underage, but if a friend exhibits these signs, you must get her medical attention immediately. Call 911. While you wait for help:

- Don't leave your friend alone.
- Let her sit down.
- Give her small sips of clear fluid, like water or Gatorade, to rehydrate her.
- Have her lie on her side to prevent her choking on her own vomit. —HOLLY SIEGEL