

The Minimum Legal Drinking Age

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Overview

- The history
- A review of the evidence
 - The failed experiment
- Around the world
- In the United States
- What can be done?
 - Colleges
 - Overall
- North Carolina

The History

- The 21st Amendment, repealing prohibition, was ratified by the required 3/4 majority of states on December 5, 1933. Of note, on November 7, 1933 North Carolina voters rejected a convention to consider the amendment.
- Following the repeal of prohibition, nearly all states designated 21 as the minimum age for purchasing and consuming alcohol. Between 1970 and 1975, however, 29 States lowered the MLDA to age 18, 19, or 20. These changes occurred at the same time that minimum-age limits for other activities, such as voting, also were being lowered.
- In the 1970s researchers began studying the effects of the lowered MLDA, focusing on alcohol related traffic crashes.

The History (2)

- April 14th, 1982, President Reagan signs executive order creating a national commission on drunk driving
- Findings of the commission include support for establishing a national 21 minimum drinking age (April 1983).
- Of note, the Pentagon reported losing a battalion per year to drunk driving fatalities and strongly supported the drinking age increase
- The National Minimum Drinking Age Act of 1984 (Title 23 U.S.C. §158) was signed into law on July 17, 1984. The act stipulated that 10% of highway funds would be withheld from any state with a minimum drinking age lower than 21.
- The Act was upheld by the Rehnquist court in *South Dakota v. Dole* (1987).

President Ronald Reagan

“Now, raising the drinking age is not a fad or an experiment. It's a proven success. Nearly every State that has raised the drinking age to 21 has produced a significant drop in the teenage driving fatalities. In the State of New Jersey, whose Governor made it a very personal crusade for himself, the rate dropped by 26 percent; Illinois, it has fallen 23 percent; in Michigan, 31 percent. And when the Commission on Drunk Driving submitted its report, it forcefully recommended that all 50 States should make 21 the legal drinking age.”

A Review of the Evidence

- A large body of research exists both in support of lower drinking ages and higher drinking ages.
- With such conflicting research how then does one reach policy conclusions?
- Two wide ranging and respected analyses have been conducted to answer this question: Wagenaar & Toomey (2000) and Shults et al. (CDC, 2001)

A Review of the Evidence: Wagenaar & Toomey

- “A large proportion of studies of the MLDA found a statistically significant, *inverse* relationship between the MLDA and alcohol consumption and alcohol-related problems. Only a small number of studies found a statistically significant, *positive* relationship between the MLDA and various outcomes (1% of the higher quality studies).”

A Review of The Evidence: Center for Disease Control

- The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has reviewed nearly 50 peer-reviewed studies of countries that had changed their drinking age and found that lowering the minimum drinking age to 18 increases fatalities by 10%. States that increased the legal drinking age to 21 saw a mean decline of 16% in motor vehicle crashes among underage youth.

(Shults et al, 2001)

Conclusions from the Two MLDA Research Analyses

- “The preponderance of evidence indicates there is an inverse relationship between the MLDA and two outcome measures: alcohol consumption and traffic crashes. The quality of the studies of specific populations such as college students is poor, preventing any conclusions that the effects of MLDA might differ for such special populations.”

(Wagenaar & Toomey, 2000)

The Failed Experiment

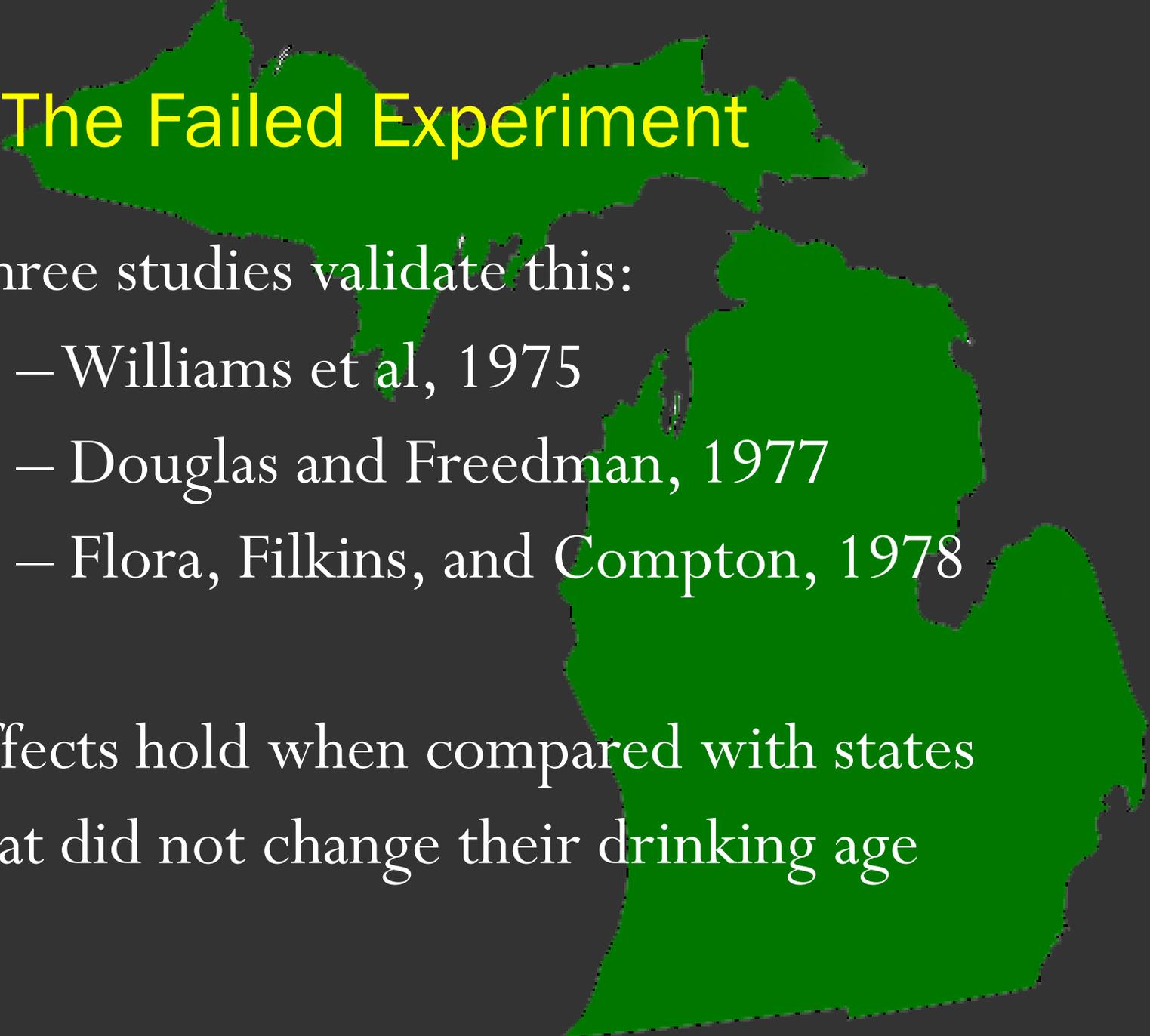
1972

Lowered drinking age
from 21 to 18

17% **increase** in nighttime fatal crashes
among 18-20 year olds

16% **increase** in nighttime fatal crashes
among 15-17 year olds

The Failed Experiment



Three studies validate this:

- Williams et al, 1975
- Douglas and Freedman, 1977
- Flora, Filkins, and Compton, 1978

Effects hold when compared with states that did not change their drinking age

The Failed Experiment

1978

Raised drinking age back
to 21

16% **decrease** in injury crashes where 18-20
year olds had been drinking

Wagenaar, 1986

The Failed Experiment

1974

Lowered drinking age
from 21 to 18

38 percent **increase** in crash fatalities
among 18 to 20 year olds over the next
seven months

Effect held when compared with states
that did not change

Ferreira and Sickerman, 1976

The Failed Experiment

1979

Increased drinking age
from 18 to 20

Decrease in 18-19 year old
fatal nighttime vehicle
crashes by 31%

Hingson, 1983

The Failed Experiment

1972

Decreased drinking age
from 21 to 18

11% **increase** in nighttime fatal crashes
among 18-20 year olds

23% **increase** in nighttime fatal crashes
among 15-17 year olds

Williams, et al, 1975

The Failed Experiment

1986

Increased drinking age back
to 21 (from 19)

Decrease in drinking crashes by 19 and
20 year olds by 27%

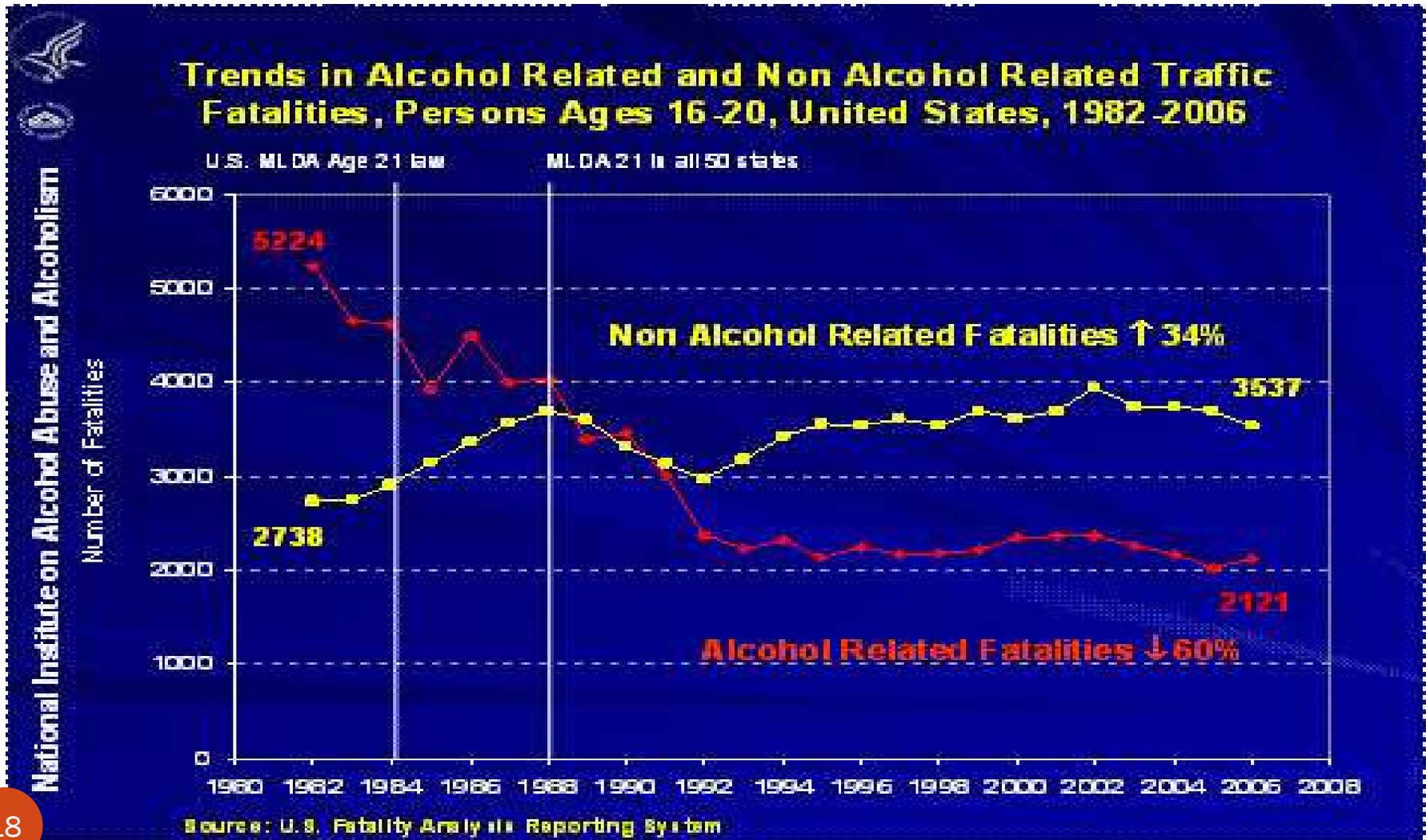
Filgio, 1995

Evidence to support MLDA 21

- Contrary to what others argue, the only two age groups-- the two impacted by the change in the law-- that decreased in alcohol related traffic fatalities between 1984-1989 (nationwide) were 16-20 and 21-24 year olds. This evidence strongly indicates that it was not seatbelt safety or automobile safety standards that led to the decrease in alcohol related traffic fatalities, instead it was the minimum legal drinking age.
 - 16-20 year olds (which decreased 28 percent)
 - 21-24 year olds (which decreased 19 percent)

NHTSA (Wright, 2000)

Evidence to Support the MLDA



The European Myth

In comparison with young people in the United States:

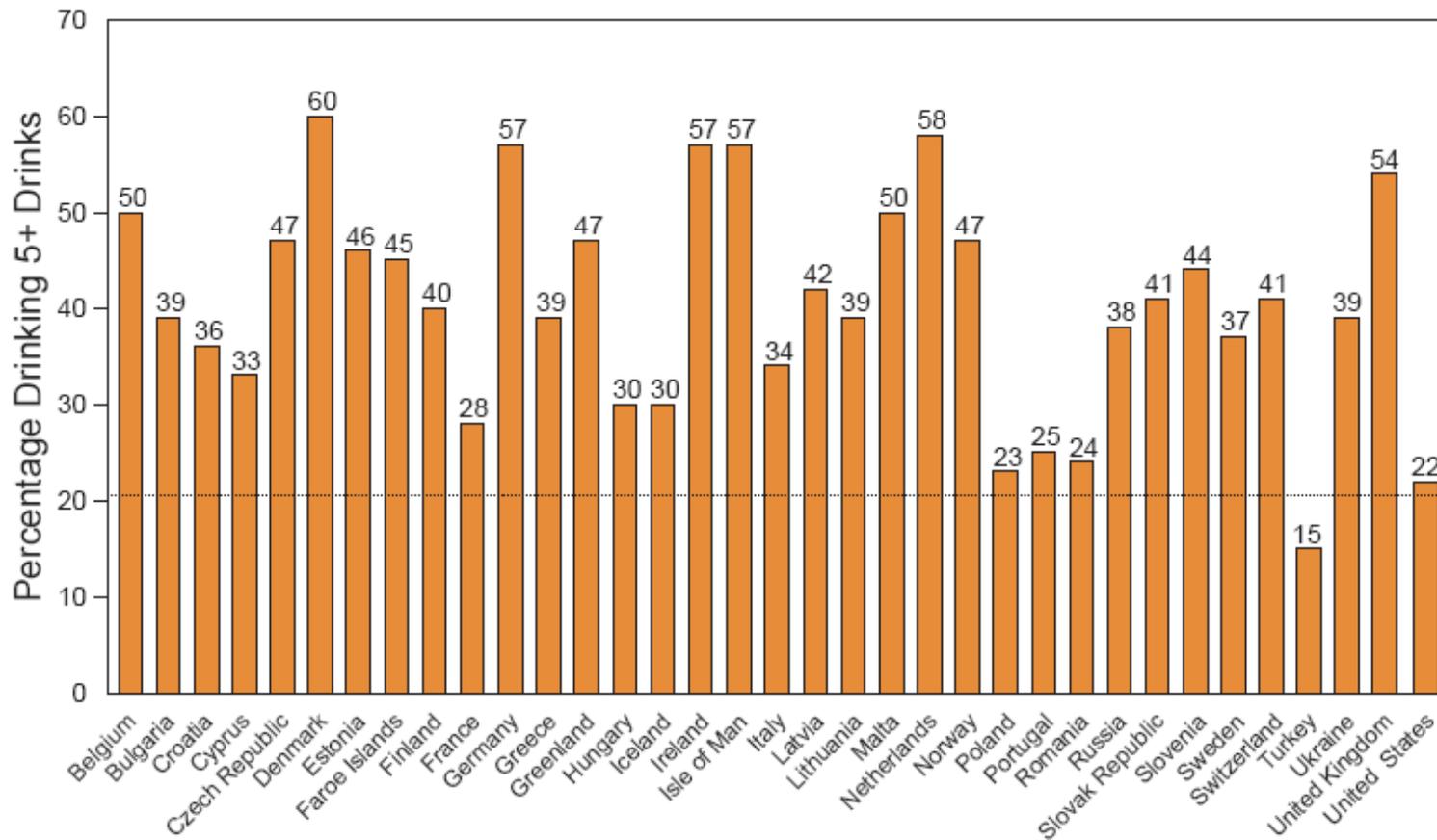
- A greater percentage of young people from nearly all European countries report drinking in the past 30 days.
- For a majority of these European countries, a greater percentage of young people report having five or more drinks in a row compared to U.S. 10th graders. Only for Turkey did a lower percentage of young people report this behavior.
- A great majority of the European countries in the survey had higher prevalence rates for self reported intoxication than the United States, less than a quarter had lower rates, and less than a quarter had rates that were more or less the same as the United States.

(Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, 2003)

Comparing the US to Europe

(15-16 year olds)

Figure 2. Prevalence of Heavy Drinking in the Past 30 Days: United States and Europe



And France is getting worse



Thursday, Jul. 17, 2008

French Combat Youth Binge-Drinking

By Bruce Crumley



- 50% increase in 15-24 year olds hospitalized for excess drinking since 2004
- 50% of 17 year olds reported being drunk in the past month
- Alcohol is the leading factor in deaths among French youth

21 Empty beer bottles left in a pile at a camping site in eastern France

Around the World

- In 1999, New Zealand lowered its drinking age from 20 to 18
 - Alcohol-involved crash rates skyrocketed
 - Among 18 and 19 year olds (12% increase for males; 51% for females)
 - Among 15-17 year olds (14% increase for males; 24% for females)
- Since that time New Zealand has considering several legislative proposals to return the drinking age to 20 or increasing it to 21.
- The Center for Disease Control (CDC) has reviewed nearly 50 peer-reviewed studies of countries that had changed their drinking age and found that lowering the minimum drinking age to 18 increases fatalities by 10 percent.

Delay, Delay, Delay...

- Among the 14 million adults aged 21 or older who were classified as having past year alcohol dependence or abuse, more than 13 million (95 percent) had started using alcohol before age 21 (NSDUH 2004).
- Persons reporting first use of alcohol before age 15 were more than 5 times as likely to report past year alcohol dependence or abuse than persons who first used alcohol at age 21 or older (NSDUH 2004).
- Critical portions of the human brain, including the frontal lobes and hippocampus, continue to develop into the mid 20s. Research has shown that alcohol use can permanently damage these developing areas of the brain (White 2003).

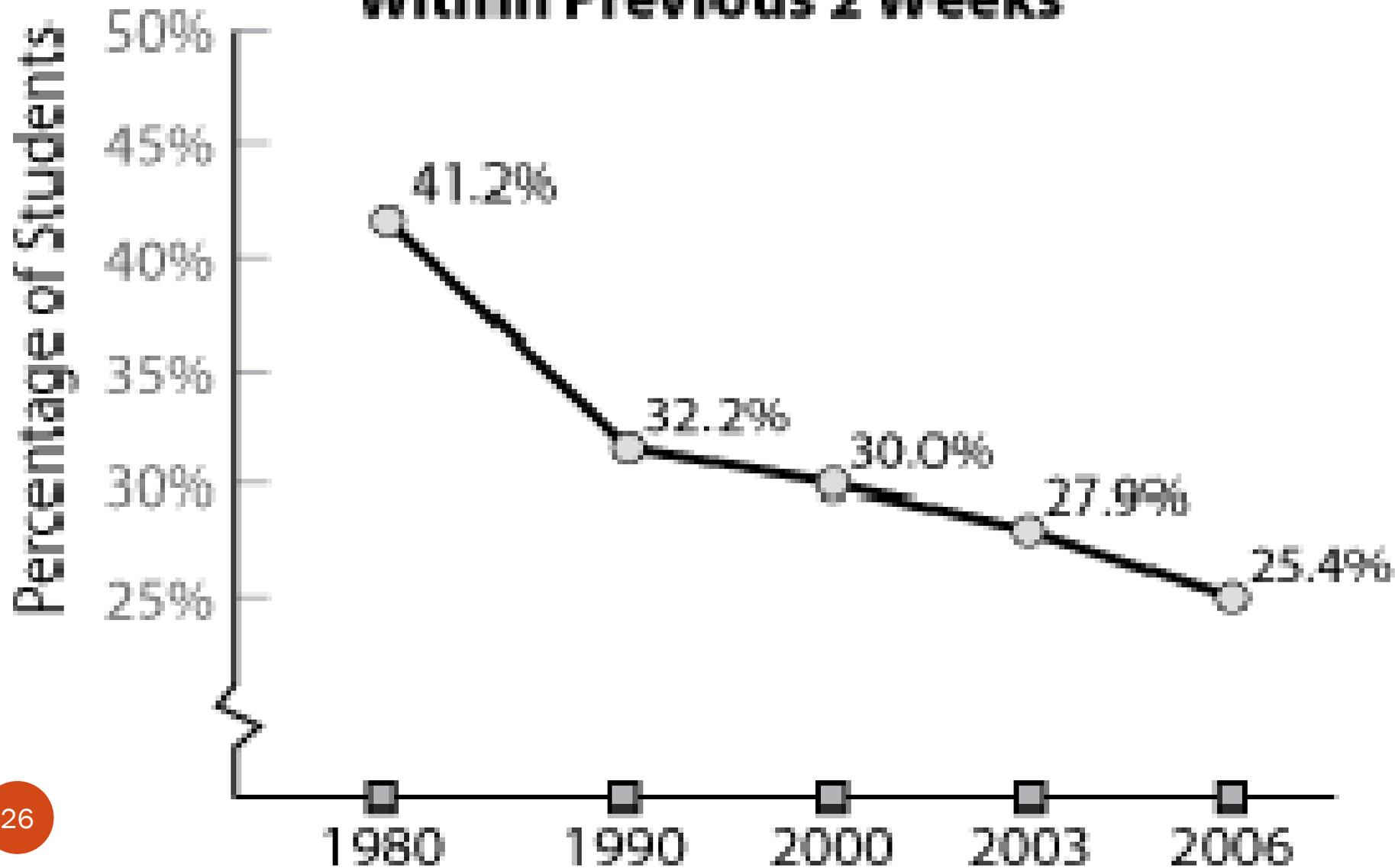
In the USA

- An estimated **25,000 lives** have been saved by the **National Minimum Drinking Age Act**. (National Center for Statistics and Analysis, 2004)
- Drinking during the previous month among persons aged 18 to 20 years declined significantly from 59% in 1985 to 40% in 1991, coinciding with states' adopting an age 21 minimum legal drinking age. (Serdula, 2004)

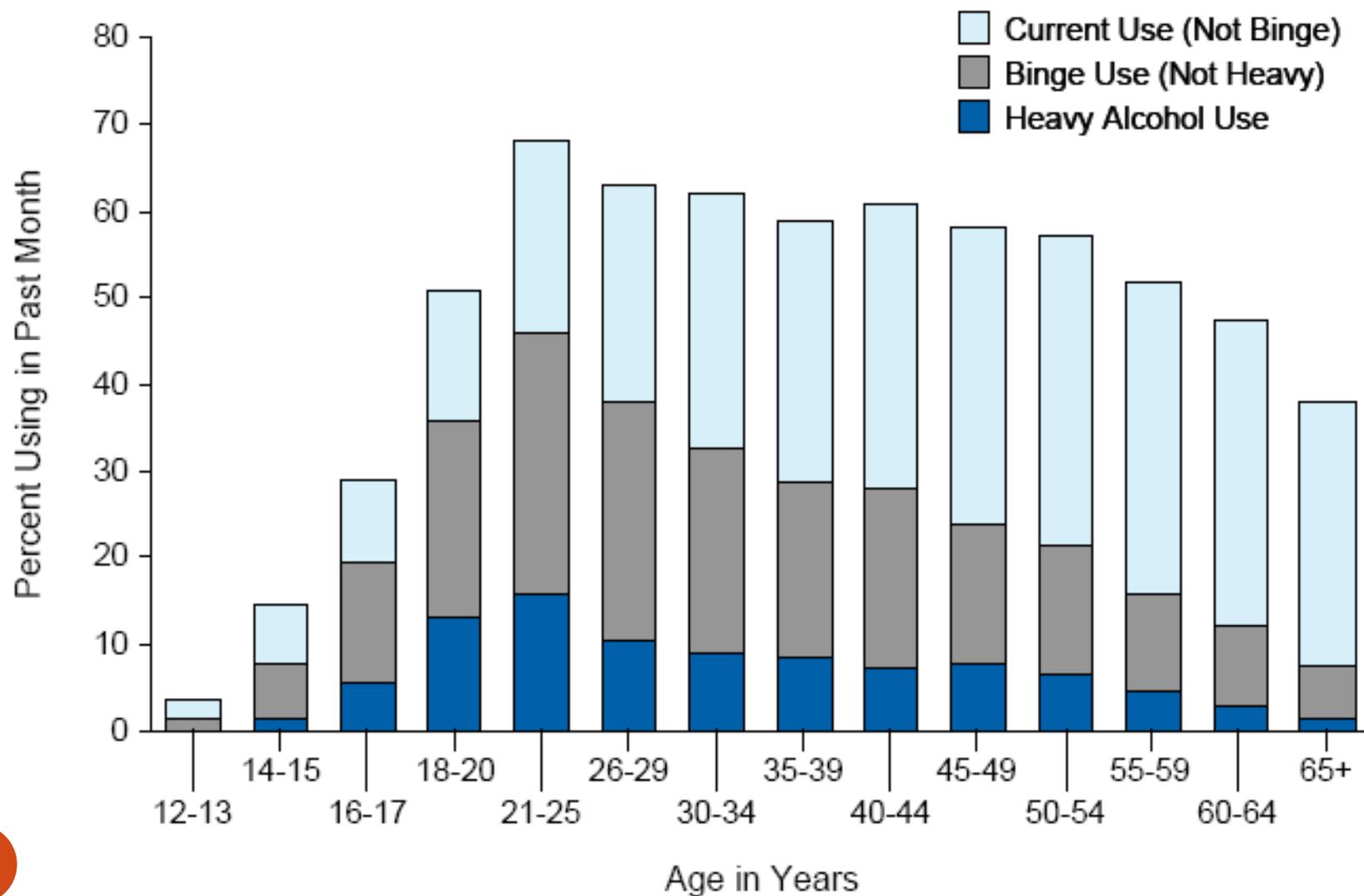
In the USA (2)

- Among those studies comparing the years before 1984 with the current era was a 2001 report from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, which found that college students who reported drinking in the last month fell from 82% in 1980 to 67% in 2000.
- In 2007, the University of Michigan's annual Monitoring the Future survey found that annual alcohol use by high school seniors has dropped from 77% in 1991 to 66% last year.

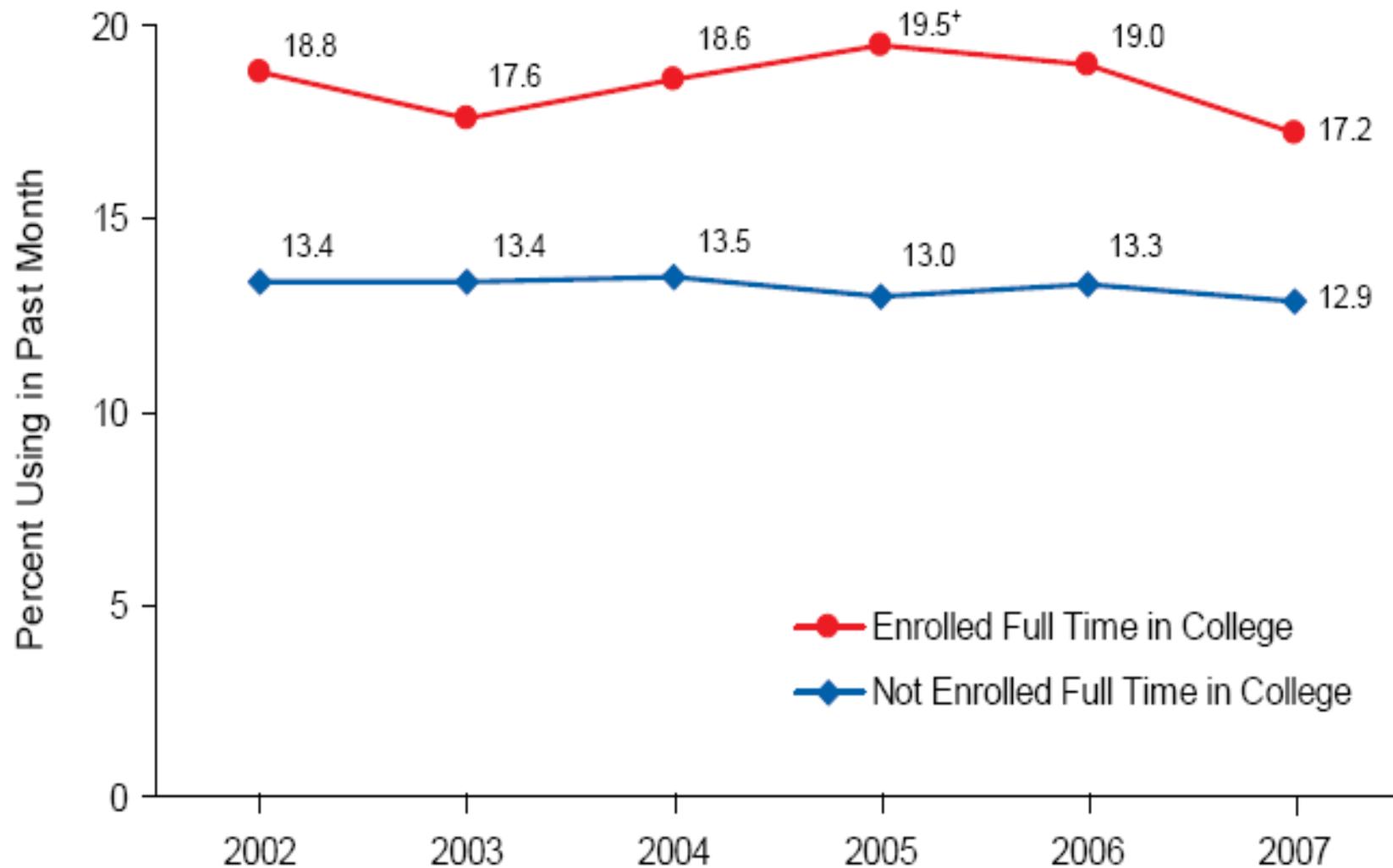
High School Seniors Who Have Consumed 5 or More Drinks on an Occasion Within Previous 2 Weeks



Current, Binge, and Heavy Alcohol Use among Persons Aged 12 or Older, by Age: 2007



Heavy Alcohol Use among Adults Aged 18 to 22, by College Enrollment: 2002-2007



28 Difference between this estimate and the 2007 estimate is statistically significant at the .05 level.

North Carolina