

## Social Studies Lesson 3

# The intersection between personal and public decision-making

## Description

This lesson seeks to guide students to think critically about an issue that may concern them in the near future. Students are invited not only to consider the way policy decisions affect them personally but to honour their responsibility as citizens to think about how policy affects others and society as a whole.

## Content and time (75-minute lesson)

1. Introduction to the issue of the legal drinking age (15 minutes)
2. Should Alberta raise the legal drinking age? (10 minutes)
3. Classroom activity – 4 options (30 to 50 minutes, depending upon option selected)
4. Class vote (10 minutes)
5. Closing (5 minutes)

## Required materials

- Copy of the *Maclean's* article for each student (optional)
- Copy of discussion questions, depending on classroom activity option selected (see below)
- Voting ballots
- Voting box (optional—can also use a hat)

## Note to teachers

This is one of a series of three Social Studies lesson plans. This lesson can be taught on its own, but it is best taught in conjunction with the other two lessons.

Each of the three lessons includes a specific activity. However, if you would like to create a larger citizenship-related assignment, consider having your students write a position paper about an alcohol policy, or write a letter to their MLA expressing their opinion about the legal drinking age.

For more information on alcohol, please refer to the CALM lessons in the full “Alcohol: A Conversation” series.

## Background: Societal cost of alcohol abuse and need for policy

In 2002, the economic cost of alcohol abuse in Alberta was estimated at \$1.6 billion (Rehm et al., 2006). This includes societal costs paid by taxpayers, such as hospital costs, emergency transport costs, lost work time, and policing. Meanwhile, in 2006/2007, the Alberta government revenue from alcohol sales was estimated at \$658.3 million (Alberta Solicitor General and Public Security, 2007). Effective strategies to reduce the social and economic costs of alcohol abuse include population-based interventions, such as policy. There are several policies that governments may introduce to address issues related to alcohol use, and one such policy is the legal drinking age.

(Source: Rehm, et al. (2006). The costs of substance abuse in Canada 2002: *Highlights*. Ottawa, ON: Canadian Centre on *Substance Abuse*.; Alberta Solicitor General and Public Security. (2007). Solicitor General and Public Security: Annual report 2006-07. Edmonton, AB.)

### 1. Introduction to the issue of legal drinking age (15 minutes)

Begin by asking students if they know what the legal drinking age is in Alberta and what it is in other provinces in Canada. Currently in Canada, each province sets its own legal drinking age. See the table below, which lists the legal drinking age by province.

Then, ask if they know what the legal drinking age is in other countries around the world. Across the world, countries have very different views on what the legal drinking age should be. Many, such as Albania and Jamaica, don't have any official legislation on the issue, and thus no legal drinking age. Others, such as the United States and Pakistan, have restricted the purchase of alcohol until the age of 21. Eleven countries around the world have a complete alcohol ban.

(Source: International Centre for Alcohol Policies. (2011). Young Peoples Drinking. Retrieved from [www.icap.org/PolicyIssues/YoungPeoplesDrinking](http://www.icap.org/PolicyIssues/YoungPeoplesDrinking). Source: Alcohol Information. (2011). Alcohol Free Countries. Retrieved from [www.alcohol-information.com/Alcohol\\_Free\\_Countries.html](http://www.alcohol-information.com/Alcohol_Free_Countries.html)).

#### Legal drinking age listed by province

Province	Current legal age	Former legal age	Date of change
Alberta	18	21	1 April 1971
British Columbia	19	21	15 April 1970
Manitoba	18	21	1 August 1970
New Brunswick	19	21	1 August 1972
Newfoundland and Labrador	19	21	25 July 1972
Northwest Territories	19	21	15 July 1970
Nova Scotia	19	21	13 April 1971
Ontario	19	18	1 January 1979

Prince Edward Island	19	18	1 July 1987
Québec	18	20	July 1972
Saskatchewan	19	18	1 September 1976
Yukon	19	21	February 1970

(Source: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. (2008). *Canadian Profile 1999*. Retrieved from: [www.ccsa.ca/Eng/Statistics/Canada/Pages/CanadianProfile1999.aspx](http://www.ccsa.ca/Eng/Statistics/Canada/Pages/CanadianProfile1999.aspx).)

## 2. Should Alberta raise the legal drinking age? (10 minutes)

In 2006 and 2007, the legal drinking age was debated across Alberta, with many advocating for raising the legal drinking age from 18 to 19. Supporters of this measure said that it would help curb increasing violence in bars and clubs. Others believed the drinking age should remain the same: they felt that raising it would only encourage more binge drinking and the illegal purchasing of alcohol by those under the legal age.

Have all students read the following article, discussing the issue in Alberta. You may want to include this as a homework assignment: students could analyse and critically appraise the article.

(Source: Macleans (2007). Alberta considers raising the drinking age. [www.macleans.ca/canada/national/article.jsp?content=20070620\\_101045\\_7712](http://www.macleans.ca/canada/national/article.jsp?content=20070620_101045_7712))

CATEGORY: NATIONAL

## Alberta considers raising the drinking age

### Province ponders keeping 18-year-olds out of bars

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Alberta is again considering raising the legal drinking age from 18 to 19 in an attempt to stifle barroom violence.

Provincial Solicitor General Fred Lindsay and the Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission are looking to neighbouring British Columbia and Saskatchewan, where the legal drinking age is 19, to see if a higher age makes a difference in terms of violence in and around bars and nightclubs.

Lindsay said Tuesday that he's not eager to change the law. "Personally, if it wasn't for the violence that's going on in and around bars, I'm quite comfortable with it the way it is," he said. "But we're looking at any means possible to reduce this increase in [violent] incidents."

Manitoba and Quebec are the other two provinces that permit alcohol consumption by 18-year-olds, while all others set it one year higher.

Ted Morton, the province's Sustainable Resources Minister, is in favour of the move.

"It's not a cure-all," he said. "[But] there's a reason B.C. and Saskatchewan have changed to 19 – that one year difference makes it a little bit easier to keep it out of the schools."

The idea comes as the province unleashes its \$630,000 Cage Your Rage advertising campaign, which seeks to reduce nighttime violence in bars and clubs. The advertisements are aimed at men 18 to 24, encouraging them to "think twice" before initiating fights.

But others argue that the solution ignores the root of the problem. Banning 18-year-olds from legally drinking could simply displace young drinkers, critics suggest, pushing them underground to bush parties or house basements - and potentially leading to greater violence, since private parties are often unsupervised.

"Unless the [Alberta Gaming and Liquor Commission] has evidence that 18-year-olds being left in the street is a safer thing than then 18-year-olds being left in the bar, I don't know where they're going with this," argued Shirley Lowe, executive director of the Old Strathcona Business Association.

Other critics include Alberta's hotel and bar industry, which may be hard hit by such a move.

"The related impact for [the] industry would be on the labour shortage side, because you obviously can't have people under age 19 in that situation serving in a licensed establishment," said Dave Kaiser of the Alberta Hotel and Lodging Association.

Morton countered that police continue to link crime and violence to alcohol the majority of the time. "So [this is] an expense issue, it's a public safety issue, but it's also a public health issue."

A similar attempt by the provincial Conservatives to raise the drinking age died in 1999 on the second reading of the bill in the legislature.

*With files from Canadian Press*

### 3. Classroom activity options (30 to 50 minutes)

After all students have read the article, here are a few activity options for engaging students in a broader discussion on the issue:

- Classroom discussion, using the questions provided below to help guide you. (30 minutes)
- Split the class up into smaller groups and have them answer the personal impact questions. Assign each group a particular perspective to discuss, based on the questions in the “Public Impact” section below (see examples in question 5), then have them answer the questions from that perspective. At the end, have a brief whole-class discussion. (45 minutes)
- Discuss the questions in the Personal Impact section as a class. Then, hold a panel discussion where students may be assigned to discuss one particular perspective, based on the questions in the Public Impact section. (45 minutes)
- Discuss the questions in the Personal Impact section as a class. Hold an in-class debate, where students are assigned a particular stance on an issue, based on the perspectives in the Public Impact section, and then develop arguments to support it for the debate. (50 minutes)

*When discussing substance abuse, it may come to your attention that some students have needs that go beyond what you can provide as their teacher. You can call your local addiction services office for support.*

*The questions below will help to guide your debate or discussion. There are no right or wrong answers, and the questions are specifically designed to have your students think critically about the role of policy and its effects.*

#### Section 1: Personal impact

1. What do you think about the current drinking age of 18 in Alberta? How does this affect your life and the lives of your friends around you, as well as other people your age?
2. What if the Alberta government introduced a law where the local drinking age was raised to 21? What would you think of this? How would this affect you and your friends? What about other people your age?
3. What if the Alberta government completely abolished laws that set legal drinking ages, so that anyone at any age could drink or purchase alcohol? What would you think about this? How would this affect you and your friends? What about other people your age?

## Section 2: Public impact

1. Now put yourself in the role of a government decision-maker. First, think about why there are different legal drinking ages around the country and around the world. Why is there a difference across Canada? Why does the drinking age vary so much from one country to another?
2. What are the potential benefits of raising the legal drinking age to 21 for the public? What are the disadvantages? Would it mean that young people start drinking later or would it have the unintended consequence that 18- to 20-year-olds habitually break the law and drink?
3. What are the potential benefits of abolishing the legal drinking age for the public? What are the drawbacks? Would it put more responsibility on adults to model healthy and appropriate use of alcohol to children and youth, or would children and teens begin consuming alcohol at an earlier age?
4. If the legal drinking age is raised or lowered, who becomes responsible for ensuring safe and responsible drinking practices? If the drinking age is lowered, are parents forced to be more involved in setting boundaries for children and teens? What are the advantages and disadvantages if this is the case? How would the roles of schools, communities and governments change? Will they have to take on more responsibility?
5. Who are the different stakeholders involved in this issue? (Examples include emergency care workers, social workers, liquor store owners, owners of bars and clubs, your own parents, and advocacy groups like Mothers Against Drinking and Driving.) What opinions are the various stakeholders likely to have about this issue? What sources of information might they use to support their points of view? Try to find out and understand what different stakeholders think and why.

### **Your opinion on a public issue** (for after panel or debate, may be answered individually)

1. How does your thinking on the personal impact (Section 1) compare with the thoughts you had from a government decision maker role (Section 2), for a) keeping the legal drinking age at 18, b) increasing the legal drinking age to 21 and c) abolishing the legal drinking age?
2. What would you propose to the government about the issue in Alberta? Would you recommend increasing the legal drinking age, decreasing it, abolishing it completely or leaving it the way it is? Why? How is 18 different from 19 and different from 21?
3. If Albertans voted tomorrow on whether to increase the legal drinking age in Alberta to 19 years of age and you were now old enough to vote (18 years of age in Alberta), would you vote yes (increase it) or no (leave it at 18)?

**4. Class vote** (10 minutes)

Asking the class to adopt the perspective of a responsible citizen, hold a class vote via secret ballot on whether the legal drinking age in Alberta should be increased to the age of 19. Add up the votes and briefly discuss the outcome.

There are other ways to voice your opinion on this issue as a responsible citizen. Discuss some ways in which you could influence this policy issue beyond exercising your right to vote (for example, write a letter to your local MLA, or approach the media in your community about your thoughts as a class).

**5. Closure: Key messages** (5 minutes)

The purpose of this lesson is to guide students in thinking critically about an issue related to alcohol that may affect them in the near future. The key message is that while policy decisions regarding alcohol may affect your life personally in one way, as responsible citizens, we are also required to think critically beyond our own interests, and consider the needs of others in the society in which we live. This is important particularly when making broader policy decisions that affect everyone living within our society.

**Class discussion**

*Taking into consideration what was discussed over the past few days about alcohol, how does considering not only your perspective, but also the perspective of others, influence your role as a responsible citizen? Has your perspective changed at all?*