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## News Release

November 30, 2005

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

### Lowering the drinking age increases car crashes among youth, study finds

*Injuries, deaths on the rise after New Zealand law change*

WASHINGTON – Lowering the drinking age causes a dramatic increase in alcohol-related car crashes among young people, according to a new study based on data from New Zealand, where the government dropped the drinking age to 18 six years ago.

This evidence is significant for the United States, because drinking and driving patterns among young people are similar. There's continuing pressure in the United States, particularly from alcohol industry interests, to reduce the minimum legal drinking age. Currently, five states have pending legislation to lower their drinking age.

“There is no traffic safety policy with more evidence for its effectiveness than minimum legal drinking age laws,” said Robert B. Voas, Ph.D., an author of the study. “Traffic crashes by young drivers were declining in New Zealand when that country decided to lower its drinking age. Thereafter, the overall road toll for those drivers rose dramatically. People in the United States who argue for lowering the drinking age should pay attention.”

Voas, a senior research scientist at PIRE Public Services Research Institute, has studied alcohol-related traffic issues for more than three decades.

The study, published in the January edition of the *American Journal of Public Health*, found that the rate of alcohol-related traffic crashes with injuries among males increased 12 percent for 18- to 19-year-olds and 14 percent among 15- to 17-year-olds in the four years before and after the law changed. For females, the rate increased 51 percent for 18- to 19-year-olds and 24 percent for 15- to 17-year-olds. The authors estimated that 400 serious injuries and 12 deaths a year among 15-19 year olds could be avoided in New Zealand by raising the drinking age.

“Most remarkable was the trickle-down effect that was seen in the 15- to 17-year-olds,” Voas said. “Clearly, they’re getting alcohol from older friends.”

In New Zealand, road traffic crashes account for more than half of all fatalities and are second only to pregnancy as a cause of hospitalization for 15- to 19-year-olds, a pattern similar to that in the United States. Alcohol impairment is the largest contributing cause of serious traffic crashes in this age group, according to the study. It’s also a major cause in the United States.

Several studies in the United States have shown significant reductions in alcohol-related traffic crashes since the Uniform Drinking Age Act in 1984, which mandates that states enact a minimum legal drinking age of 21 or risk losing federal highway construction money. A review of 17 studies from states which raised drinking ages found a 16 percent reduction in crashes involving underage youth.

The outcomes found in the New Zealand study are similar to those from the United States after drinking ages were lowered in many states the early 1970s. A number of studies on the effects of those drinking age changes showed a substantial increase in traffic crashes involving young people. Today, all 50 states have a minimum 21 drinking age.

PIRE, or Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, is a national nonprofit public health research and program institute with centers in seven cities and funded largely by federal research grants and contracts.

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