

Commentary

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Drinking and Driving Remains a National Problem; Reducing it Must Remain a National Priority

The National Survey of Drinking and Driving released by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) revealed that in the past year one fifth (20%) of Americans age 16 and older drove a car within two hours of consuming alcohol.¹ A total of 27% of males and 14% of females reported at least one past year “drinking-driving” trip. In addition, 13% of individuals reported drinking-driving trips within the past 30 days. Once again, significantly more males (20%) reported past month drinking-driving than females (7%). The annual and past month figures have not significantly changed since 1993, demonstrating that drinking-driving remains a significant national problem.

Although a drinking-driving trip does not necessarily indicate driver intoxication, in the past year 30% of drinking-drivers drove a car when they thought they were over the legal limit. The proportion of drivers who drove over the legal limit declined age; the largest proportion was among drinking-drivers ages 16 to 20 (57%).

The amount of alcohol that drinking-drivers believed was safe to consume within a 2-hour period before driving varied: less than 1 drink (6%), 1 drink (20%), 2 drinks (31%), 3-4 drinks (29%), 5 or more drinks (11%) or they did not know (3%). Although a Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) of 0.08 g/mL is the national standard for intoxication and detection of drunk driving, many drivers can be impaired at lower levels of BAC.

The combination of alcohol and drugs is a problem that the new NHTSA survey does not address. As the 2007 National Roadside Survey showed, 20.5% of weekend nighttime drivers were positive for both alcohol and one or more drug.ⁱⁱ¹ To demonstrate the connection between alcohol and drug use and impaired driving, one can look to a study of Driving Under the Influence (DUI) suspects where 86% were positive for alcohol, 31% were positive for illegal drugs, and 25% were positive for both.ⁱⁱⁱ Of the DUI suspects who provided breath samples below 0.08 g/mL, 51% were positive for drugs.² Of the DUI suspects who provided breath samples at or above 0.08 g/mL, 22% also were positive for drugs. The combination of alcohol and drug use among drivers is alarming.

As the new NHTSA survey shows, the public is aware of the problem of drinking and driving; 81% of survey respondents believed it is a major threat to the personal safety of themselves and their families. In addition 43% had previously been in a situation in which someone had too much to drink to drive safely but was planning to drive. However, in terms of drinking and

¹ The presence of alcohol and/or drugs in the National Roadside Survey does not necessarily reflect impairment.

² Positive test results indicate the presence of drugs and do not demonstrate impairment.

driving enforcement, relatively few drivers (12%) believed that it is “almost certain” that a driver who has too much to drink will be stopped by police, or almost certain that it will result in a motor vehicle crash (17%). While 66% of respondents believed that penalties for violating drinking and driving laws should be more severe only 43% of drinking-drivers agreed.

Drunk driving is by definition illegal drug use and is a focus of concern for the Institute for Behavior and Health, Inc. (IBH), as is drugged driving. Driving after consuming alcohol and/or illegal drugs is a danger to public health and public safety. Reducing drunk and drugged driving must remain a national priority in conjunction with widespread education campaigns to inform drivers of the hazards posed by driving after using either drugs or alcohol.

To learn more about IBH and impaired driving visit www.ibhinc.org and www.StopDruggedDriving.org.

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ⁱ Drew, L., Royal, D., Moulton, B., Peterson, A., & Haddix, D. (2010, August). National Survey of Drinking and Driving Attitudes and Behaviors: 2008, Volume I: Summary Report. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Transportation National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. DOT HS 811 342.

ⁱⁱ Compton, R., & Berning, A. (2009). Results of the 2007 National Roadside Survey of Alcohol and Drug Use by Drivers. Traffic Safety Facts Research Note. (DOT HS 811 175) Washington, DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Retrieved September 30, 2010 from <http://www.whitehousedrugpolicy.gov/publications/pdf/07roadsidesurvey.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Fix, L.J., Leaverton, P.E., Buchan, B.J., & Walsh, J.M. (1997). Prevalence of drug use in persons injured or killed in vehicular related accidents, in the Proceedings of the 14 th International Conference on Alcohol, Drugs and Traffic Safety, C. Mercier-Guyon [Ed.] Vol. 2, pp. 751-756, CERMT, entre d'Etudes et de Recherches en Medecine du Trafic, Annecy, France, 1997.