



Drug-impaired driving rising in Palm Beach County with prescription drug abuse

Drugs such as oxycodone and Xanax playing larger role in crashes

By [Angel Streeter](#), Sun Sentinel

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The scourge of prescription drug abuse is hitting South Florida roads and highways.

Increasingly, drugs such as oxycodone and alprazolam, commonly known as Xanax, are playing larger roles in traffic crashes.

In Palm Beach County, drug-related crashes increased 18 percent last year. There were 64 such cases last year compared to 54 in 2005.

Statewide, drug-related crashes dropped 3 percent last year after climbing nearly 11 percent in 2009. In the last five years, drug-related crashes in Florida increased from 1,176 in 2005 to 1,236 in 2010.

Broward County is "seeing quite a few cases" of drug-impaired driving involving prescription drugs, said Dr. Harold Schueler, chief toxicologist for Broward County's Medical Examiner Office. But it's unclear if those numbers are increasing.

As all crashes have declined in recent years, so have DUI crashes.

"Prescription-drug abuse certainly makes South Florida's highways and side streets more dangerous any time of the day, not just after happy hour," said Jim Hall, director of the Center for the Study and Prevention of Substance Abuse at Nova Southeastern University.

Police officers, prosecutors and families of victims killed by drivers under the influence of drugs are seeing the results of easy access to prescription medications.

Palm Beach County Assistant State Attorney Ellen Roberts said she increasingly is prosecuting cases in which drug-impaired drivers played a role in deadly crashes.

"Alcohol is still the majority of our prosecutions, but a good percentage of them are other types of drugs," she said. "We're seeing more and more of them."

The anti-anxiety drug Xanax is the most commonly found drug in the deadly crashes, followed by oxycodone, she said. Perpetrators often are combining them with alcohol.

Very few of those drugged-driving cases involve marijuana or cocaine.

That's vastly different from what's happening nationwide. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, marijuana is the drug most commonly found in drivers, followed by cocaine.

Incidents of crashes involving prescription drugs can be found all over Palm Beach County.

In November, Beruch Zegeye, of Palm Beach Gardens, pleaded guilty to DUI manslaughter in a 2008 crash that killed Paul Krommendyk, 45.

The former Benjamin School student, 19, had a blood-alcohol level of 0.072 when he plowed into Krommendyk, who was working his second job as a pizza delivery man, according to police reports. Prosecutors said Zegeye and other Benjamin School students were popping Xanax during a day of partying.

Ena Kane, who lived west Boca Raton, lost her husband and daughter in a deadly crash in May 2010. Angela Stracar, 26, has been charged with DUI manslaughter and vehicular homicide in the crash.

"My life has been very sad since then," Kane said. "I had a wonderful husband and a wonderful daughter. I had a wonderful life."

Robert and Ena Kane retired to Boca Raton about 20 years ago from New York. In 1995, their only child, Odette Kane, 51, moved here to be near them.

She lived near her parents' Boca Isles South home and visited every night, Ena Kane said.

On May 21, 2010, father and daughter were coming back from picking up dinner, pulling into the Kaness' subdivision, when they were blindsided.

According to investigators, Stracar, of Boca Raton, drove her SUV off the road and smashed through the "Boca Isles South" sign. The SUV went airborne and landed on the Kaness' Cadillac, tearing off the roof.

The Kaness died at the scene.

Blood tests later showed Stracar, whose trial begins in October, had oxycodone, alprazolam, alcohol and THC — the active ingredient in marijuana — in her system.

"They just went out for 15 minutes," said Kane, who lives on the same street as Stracar's family. "Someone like her should not be driving."

Poly-drug use, or taking multiple drugs, is common in people who abuse prescription drugs, Hall said.

The typical cocktail is a painkiller, tranquilizer or sedative and a muscle relaxer. That combined use dramatically increases impairment.

"Throw in a beer and you really got trouble," Hall said.

Since oxycodone and Xanax are central nervous system depressants, both cause signs of impairment similar to alcohol, said Schueler, the Broward County toxicologist.

A person taking those drugs may become drowsy and lethargic. Reaction time may be slow.

In fact, the drugs carry warnings on their labels that urge caution when driving after taking the medication, Schueler said.

Boca Raton Officer Fred Laurie is seeing a shift in impaired-driving cases. When he became a police officer 13 years ago, most impaired driving involved alcohol. Now, drug impairment is beginning to compete with drunken driving, he said.

"Narcotics are as readily available now as going to the liquor store and getting a case of beer," said Laurie, who is specially trained to detect drug impairment in drivers. "The top three I run into: First are

antidepressants (Xanax, Zoloft), second are narcotic analgesics (pain pills), and the third very common one is marijuana."

He points out that having a prescription for those medications doesn't excuse drivers from driving impaired.

The full impact of drug-impaired driving is hard to gauge. Collecting data is difficult because some law enforcement agencies don't distinguish between drug impairment and alcohol impairment, said Ann Howard, spokeswoman for the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles.

Plus, not all agencies test for drugs in serious crashes.

"It's a hard number to grab," Howard said.

Another challenge is detecting drug impairment. Unlike alcohol, there is no threshold to show a driver is impaired on drugs. In Florida, drivers are considered impaired if they have a blood-alcohol level of 0.08.

No similar standard exists for drugs. That's because there are so many drugs that affect the body in so many ways. They also affect people differently and tend to linger in the body long after the effects have worn off.

And not as much research has been conducted on drugs other than alcohol.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is concluding a long-term study that could begin establishing crash-risk thresholds for certain drugs.

Until then, officers such as Laurie are used to identify the signs and symptoms associated with drug impairment.

In prosecuting cases, Roberts said, she focuses on whether or not a defendant had a prescription for the drugs found in his or her blood and how long the person has been taking the medication.

Over time, the longer someone is on a medication, he or she is able to build up a higher tolerance to it. But recreational users still are feeling the effects of the powerful medications.

Still, in the drug-related fatal crashes Roberts has prosecuted, few have had prescriptions.
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