

Commentary

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Mandatory Alcohol Testing Associated with Reduction in Alcohol-Related Fatal Crashes Among Commercial Drivers

A new study examined the effects of the U.S. Department of Transportation's (DoT) mandatory alcohol testing programs for transportation employees through the reduction of alcohol-related fatal car crashes involving commercial drivers¹. The effects of the Omnibus Transportation Employee Testing Act of 1991 which made it mandatory for any transportation employee in a safety sensitive position to be subject to both alcohol and drug testing had never been examined. This law particularly impacted commercial drivers, also known as motor carriers, whose work puts them on the nation's highways.

Researchers determined the risk of alcohol involvement in fatal crashes among commercial drivers from 1982 through 2006 by comparing the rates of fatal crashes before and after the mandatory alcohol testing program. There was a 23% reduction in fatal crashes that involved alcohol among commercial drivers during the period of testing. The safety benefit of alcohol testing program remained consistent for all age groups and for both male and female commercial drivers.

Consistent with other studies, researchers also showed that younger commercial drivers between the ages of 25 and 34 who were either male or who had a history of driving while intoxicated (DWI) were at a much greater risk of alcohol involvement in fatal crashes.

This study had a several important limitations. First, alcohol testing was not performed on all of the study subjects although all were subject to random testing. The study also did not account for other legal and/or policy changes that may have affected the rate of fatal crashes among commercial drivers

While this study shows strong support for mandatory alcohol testing programs among transportation employees, it does not contain data on the relationship of the use of other drugs in fatal crashes. This is because the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) Fatality Analysis Report System (FARS) data does not include drug test results other than alcohol for the vast majority of fatally injured drivers.

This is surprising because drug testing is an essential part of the DoT testing program. Drug tests are included for a very good reason: drugged driving is a major problem for commercial drivers, as it is for all drivers. In fact, a recent nationwide DoT study of nighttime weekend drivers showed that driving under the influence of illegal drugs was even more common than drunk

driving². It could be that similar reductions in drug-involved fatalities have occurred as a result of the mandatory testing programs since their inception.

The central highway safety challenge today is not to choose to deal with either alcohol or other drugs of abuse but to study both and to develop effective public education, enforcement and offender management programs to reduce the deadly impact of both alcohol and other drugs of abuse on the nation's roads and highways.

For more information about drugged driving and about what to do to reduce it, visit: www.StopDruggedDriving.org and www.ibhinc.org.

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¹ Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health (2009, September 14). Mandatory Alcohol Testing For Truck And Bus Drivers Reduces Alcohol Involvement In Fatal Crashes. *ScienceDaily*. Retrieved September 18, 2009, from <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/09/090911114304.htm>

² Richard Compton, & Amy Berning, Results of the 2007 National Survey of Alcohol and Drug Use By Drivers. National Highway Traffic Safety Facts. Washington, DC: NHTSA's National Center for Statistics and Analysis (July 2009) DOT HS 811 175