Trends in Impaired Driving in the United States: Complacency and Backsliding?

K. Stewart¹ and J. Fell²

¹Safety and Policy Analysis, International, 3798 Mosswood Drive, Lafayette, CA 94549, USA; ²Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, 11710 Beltsville Drive, Suite 300, Calverton, MD 20705, USA

Keywords
Alcohol, trends, impaired driving, prevention

Abstract
After years of decline, alcohol-related crash rates have stalled and actually increased. This paper describes recent trends and suggests a variety of strategies to reduce impaired driving.

Introduction
For more than a decade, rates of alcohol-related crashes have declined in the United States. In 2000, however, 40 percent of all fatalities involved alcohol, up from the historic low of 38 percent in 1999. It was the first increase in alcohol-related deaths since 1995. In 2000, 16,653 fatalities were alcohol-related, compared to 15,976 in 1999 (Table 1). This was very discouraging news, especially in light of the bold new national goal that was established in 1995 to reduce alcohol-related traffic fatalities in America to no more than 11,000 by the year 2005 (1). At that time, 125 recommendations were made to meet the ambitious goal. Despite all this activity, progress in achieving this national public health goal has been slow and for the last year movement has been in the wrong direction. In addition, the prevalence of drinking drivers on the roadways on Friday and Saturday nights did not change much in the U.S. between 1986 and 1996 (Figure 1) (2). An update of a model used to analyze the effectiveness of various impaired driving laws in the U.S. (3) projects that alcohol-related fatalities will still be at about 16,600 in 2005 if present trends continue.

This slowness in progress is particularly discouraging because the tools to make significant progress are available. Many effective strategies are well known, but not implemented as widely or as vigorously as possible. Because of the significant progress that has been made in the past, complacency may have set in among policy makers. The level of public awareness and concern seems to have waned, with attention deflected to other issues. This paper will discuss some of the major strategies that can contribute to further reductions in impaired driving in the U.S. Many of these strategies have already helped reduce alcohol-related traffic fatalities in this country. Reinvigorated efforts can help regain lost ground and move us towards our goal.
Table 1: Traffic Fatalities and Alcohol Related Fatalities 1982-2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Fatalities</th>
<th>Alcohol-Related</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1982</td>
<td>43,945</td>
<td>57% 25,165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983</td>
<td>42,589</td>
<td>56% 23,646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1984</td>
<td>44,257</td>
<td>54% 23,758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>43,825</td>
<td>52% 22,716</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1986</td>
<td>46,087</td>
<td>52% 24,045</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>46,390</td>
<td>51% 23,641</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1988</td>
<td>47,087</td>
<td>50% 23,626</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1989</td>
<td>45,582</td>
<td>49% 22,404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>44,599</td>
<td>49% 22,084</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>41,508</td>
<td>48% 19,887</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1992</td>
<td>39,250</td>
<td>45% 17,858</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>40,150</td>
<td>44% 17,473</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1994</td>
<td>40,716</td>
<td>41% 16,580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>41,817</td>
<td>41% 17,247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1996</td>
<td>42,066</td>
<td>41% 17,218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>42,013</td>
<td>39% 16,189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>41,501</td>
<td>38% 16,020</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>41,717</td>
<td>38% 15,976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>41,182</td>
<td>40% 16,653</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Drinking Drivers on the Roadways 1973 vs. 1986 vs. 1996
Strategies to reduce impaired driving

The key strategies for reducing impaired driving include the legislative framework, enforcement efforts, public awareness and alternative transportation strategies. Each of these areas will be discussed below.

Legislation

Effective impaired driving laws form the foundation for any impaired driving program. These laws send a message to the public that impaired driving is serious and will not be tolerated. In order to have maximum effect, impaired driving laws must be well publicized and well enforced.

• General Deterrence

Laws that send a message to all potential drinking drivers are general deterrent laws. These laws make it clear that offenders, when caught, will receive serious consequences. Some of the most important laws include:

Administrative License Revocation (ALR). A total of 40 States and the District of Columbia have adopted such laws, which allow for the immediate suspension of the driving license of anyone arrested with a blood alcohol concentration over the legal limit. If the remaining ten States adopt ALR laws, an estimated 300-350 lives could be saved each year (3).

Lowering the illegal per se blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit to .08 g/dl. Most States previously adopted .10g/dl or .10 BAC as the illegal limit. However, in recent years, a number of States have lowered the illegal limit to .08 BAC. Studies show that States that have lowered the limit to .08 BAC have experienced an average 8 percent reduction in fatal crashes involving drivers with BACs exceeding .10 BAC. The majority of the public are in favor of lowering the per se limit to .08 BAC (4). At present, 30 States plus the District of Columbia (DC) have lowered their illegal BAC limit to .08. If all States adopt the .08 standard, an estimated 590 lives could be saved annually (3).

Graduated Driver Licensing. About half the States have adopted some form of graduated licensing system for young novice drivers. The system involves a series of distinct stages of licensing to allow young drivers to gain experience in driving under relatively low risk conditions before they “graduate” to the next level. The licensing system should include certain key driving restrictions such as a nighttime driving curfew and a limit on the number of young passengers in the vehicle when a novice is driving. Studies show that graduated licensing systems adopted by States result in a 5-8 percent reduction in fatal crash involvement by young drivers (5).

Occupant Protection Laws. While not a law that prevents impaired driving, primary safety belt usage laws have the potential to save almost 700 alcohol-related traffic deaths each year if all States adopt them (6). These laws allow police to stop and ticket drivers for failure to wear safety belts. In states without such laws, the driver must be stopped for some other offense in order to be ticketed for not buckling up. Wearing a safety restraint reduces a driver’s chance of a fatal injury in a crash by 45 percent (6). Fewer than 20 States have adopted primary safety belt usage laws. They have the potential to reduce alcohol-related fatalities substantially because as the law permits the enforcement of safety belt laws to become more vigorous, proportionately
more high risk drivers – including drinking drivers - will buckle up. In States that adopt primary laws, safety belt usage goes from about 60-70% to 75-85%.

• **Specific Deterrence**

Laws that deal specifically with drivers arrested for driving while intoxicated (DWI) are called *specific deterrent laws*. There are some promising laws that deal with chronic and repeat offenders. Some of the key laws are described below.

**Vehicle sanctions.** Many States have passed laws allowing judges to immobilize, impound, confiscate, or forfeit vehicles owned by drivers convicted of a second or multiple impaired driving offense within the past three or five years. The rationale behind these laws is that if these offenders were not deterred by the consequences of the first conviction, then they must be separated from their vehicles. Recent research is showing that these vehicle sanctions are reducing recidivism by about 50 percent (7). Some States confiscate and destroy the license plates of the vehicles as a more economical vehicle action. There is evidence that this is also effective in reducing recidivism (8).

Alcohol ignition interlock devices have also been used by several States to eliminate any impaired driving by chronic DWI offenders. These devices require drivers to pass an alcohol breathalyzer test before they can start their vehicle. Interlocks allow repeat offenders to drive their vehicles on a restricted license, but not after they have been drinking. Research shows that while ignition interlocks are on these offender’s vehicles, they are very effective in reducing recidivism (9). Offenders pay for the installation and a monthly fee for the monitoring and maintenance of the interlock.

These vehicle-based sanctions, while they are specific deterrents to repeat DWI offenders, could have a general deterrent effect if they are highly publicized and are used in some instances on first offenders.

**Enforcement**

Highly publicized and frequent enforcement of impaired driving probably has great potential for reducing impaired driving crashes in this country. Two key areas for enforcement are described below.

• **Sobriety checkpoints**

Numerous studies have shown that when sobriety checkpoints are conducted fairly frequently in a community, are publicized, and are highly visible, significant reductions in impaired driving occurs (10). Recently, a few States have committed to statewide sobriety checkpoint programs with very dramatic results. After North Carolina conducted a series of checkpoint blitzes called “Booze it and Lose it”, the proportion of drivers on the roadways with BACs at .05 or greater was cut in half. A different statewide program called “Checkpoint Tennessee”, where highly publicized checkpoints were held each weekend in 2-4 counties for a period of one year, resulted in a 20 percent reduction in impaired driver fatal crashes in Tennessee. This program saved over 100 lives in Tennessee during that year (11).
Only 37 States in the U.S. conduct sobriety checkpoints and many of them are only conducted once or twice a year during certain holiday periods. If sobriety checkpoints are conducted at least on a weekly basis, somewhere in the State, are publicized and are visible, dramatic reductions in alcohol-related traffic fatalities would occur in this country.

• **Enforcement of minimum drinking age and zero tolerance laws**

The minimum legal drinking age in the US is 21. All states also have laws, called “zero tolerance laws” that make it illegal for drivers under 21 to drive with even small amounts of alcohol in their systems. While minimum drinking age laws and zero tolerance laws for youth have saved thousands of lives over the years, many States do not enforce these laws to any great extent. Zero tolerance laws effectively reduce under age 21 drinking driver fatal crashes by up to 24 percent. If these laws were enforced to any great extent, their effectiveness would be even greater (12). With the population of 15-20 year old drivers continuing to grow in the U.S. and the reported increase in binge drinking for this age group increasing in recent years, a renewed emphasis on youth underage drinking enforcement is overdue.

**Public information and awareness**
Impaired driving has become socially unacceptable to most of the American public. There is evidence that public awareness of the impaired driving problem goes up and alcohol-related fatalities go down when the number of newspaper stories and television and radio coverage of this subject increases substantially. There is no question that the media coverage of citizen activists groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) during the 1980s dramatically changed the public’s attitude about the issue. MADD put “faces on the numbers” and made people realize that these drunk driving tragedies happened to real people and could happen to them or a loved one (13). Publicity about impaired driving has waned in recent years and this could be one of the reasons for the stagnation in progress. Impaired driving stories compete with many other social and public health issues for earned media coverage. Renewed efforts to get impaired driving into the news once again can help capture the public’s attention.

**Alternatives to drinking and driving**
Assuming there is a renewed vigor in the impaired driving problem, and many drivers get the message not to drink and drive, what alternatives can we offer them? A substantial portion of the population would like to consume alcohol in social settings away from home. Alternatives to drinking and driving must be provided in order to reduce impaired driving. Public transportation is not always easily available, but where it is it should be promoted for transportation both to and from drinking settings. Other alternative transportation strategies include designated drivers, free rides or safe rides programs in which volunteers drive drinkers home, and subsidized taxi rides (14) (15).

**Discussion**
Several well established strategies exist that can significantly reduce impaired driving in the United States if they are implemented more broadly and more vigorously. Action should be taken at the national, state, and local level to ensure that we continue to make progress in reducing alcohol-related traffic crashes (16).
References