

Ignition Interlock - Silver Bullet for Drunk Driving? Barriers and Promise

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ISSUE: California was the first state to enact legislation authorizing judges to order DUI offenders to install ignition interlock devices. During the ensuing two decades, the original legislation was modified several times, in an effort to increase the use of interlocks, but this has met with only limited success. This paper presents the results of both a process evaluation, which discusses barriers to implementation of interlocks, and an outcome evaluation on the effectiveness of the devices, and discusses these issues in the context of other DUI countermeasures.

METHODS: Process evaluation: Several studies comprise the process evaluation. One tracks a sample of DUI-suspended drivers from arrest through adjudication, sentencing and interlock assignment, a second tracks the use of ignition interlocks as a sentencing option over time, and a third surveys judges, prosecutors and offenders to gain insights into barriers to wider use of the devices.

Outcome evaluation: Five separate studies comprise the outcome evaluation. Three studies examine the impact on crashes and DUI convictions of judicial interlock orders for three populations: DUI-suspension violators, first DUI offenders, and second DUI offenders. A fourth study examines the effects of interlock installation on different offender populations, while a fifth looks at repeat DUI offenders who installed an interlock in order to obtain a restricted driver license. All studies are quasi-experimental in nature, use propensity scores to perform one-to-one matching of control subjects to interlock subjects, and employ Cox regression using demographic and prior driving data as covariates in order to determine the impact of ignition interlock orders/installations on subsequent DUI convictions and crashes.

RESULTS: The process evaluation found that judges ordered the installation of an ignition interlock device for less than 25% of offenders who are required by law to receive such an order, and that of those ordered to install a device, only about 20% comply. The survey of judges and prosecutors identified three main barriers to greater use of interlocks: the ability of offenders to pay for a device; many offenders do not own vehicles, and; the monitoring of offenders ordered to install a device is time-consuming and difficult.

The outcome evaluation showed that judicial orders to install an interlock are generally not associated with a decline in recidivism, but do have a suppression effect on crash rates, probably due to lower exposure, while interlock installation is related to lower rates of DUI recidivism, although it is also linked to an increase in crash rates.

DISCUSSION: Judicial programs in California and elsewhere rarely lead to widespread integration of ignition interlocks into DUI sentencing practices, due partly to judicial resistance, and partly to operational considerations. Administrative programs have the potential to be more successful, although there needs to be sufficient inducement for offenders to install interlocks. Consideration needs to be given to the proper use of ignition interlocks in the context of other, proven-effective DUI countermeasures.

Keywords: Ignition interlock, Drunk driving, Implementation, DUI/DWI recidivism