Trends in Impaired Driving in the United States: Time for a New Paradigm?

Kathryn Stewart*1 and James Fell2
1Safety and Policy Analysis International, 3798 Mosswood Drive, Lafayette, CA 94549, USA
2Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation, Calverton, MD 20705, USA

This paper is presented as part of the session on worldwide trends in impaired driving. It provides analysis of the current situation in the United States.

After 15 years of decline, in the last decade, the percentage of fatal crashes that involve alcohol has stalled at about 40%. It is apparent that policies, enforcement levels, geographic, and other factors play a role in determining the level of alcohol involvement. States vary widely in the involvement of alcohol in fatal crashes with state-to-state percentages of fatal crashes involving alcohol ranging from 12% to 50% in 2005.

The lack of progress may in part result from the fact that, while many effective strategies are well known, they are not implemented as widely or as vigorously as possible. For example, well-publicized sobriety checkpoints have been shown to have a significant impact on impaired driving, but they tend to be implemented only sporadically and only in limited areas of the country.

Some aspects of the impaired driving problem have been particularly difficult to change. For example, a higher percentage of motorcycle operators in fatal crashes have alcohol in their systems as compared to drivers of passenger cars. In other areas, some progress is apparent. The number of licensed drivers younger than 21 declined by 14 percent between 1982 and 2004 while the number of underage drinking drivers in fatal crashes declined by 62 percent during that period. Thus, it appears that the MLDA 21 law and the national zero tolerance law had a substantial effect on underage drinking and driving.

It may be that we are approaching the limits of policy and deterrence to suppress impaired driving. This possibility, along with the dramatic advances in technology, has led some advocates and policy makers to promote the wider application of technological approaches to preventing impaired driving. Currently, many states are considering more vigorous use of alcohol ignition interlocks for impaired driving offenders and two states have passed legislation mandating interlocks for first offenders. A Blue Ribbon panel has also been organized to examine how technology could be used to prevent driving over the legal limit in the general population through the installation of alcohol detection technologies in all vehicles. Such strategies would mark a new direction for the impaired driving field and could bring about the progress that has been lacking for so long.

Keywords: Trends, impaired driving