Automobile Fatalities in Chicago from 1910 to 1930: Understanding the Emerging Role of Alcohol in Traffic Safety

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Abstract: From early in the 20th century until the mid 1920’s, the Chicago Tribune regularly published the “Hands of Death”, a figure in the shape of the clock with three hands and numbers in varying intervals up to 1,000 in the place of the normal hours of the day. The caption underneath read “The hands of the clock indicate the number of deaths by autos, guns, and moonshine in Cook County since Jan. 1.” On one particular day, November 24, 1924, the hands pointed to 616 auto deaths, 313 gun deaths, and 202 moonshine deaths. The most striking aspect of this figure, beyond the number of fatalities, is the implicit independence of each hand; death is produced by alcohol or auto, with no attempt to marry the two social problems.

Further evidence of the disconnect between alcohol consumption and auto deaths comes from the Chicago Historical Homicide Project, a dataset chronicling 11,018 homicides in Chicago between 1870 and 1930, drawn from police reports. Between 1910 and 1930 nearly 1,600 traffic deaths were recorded, yet the role of alcohol was noted in only 21 cases. Current estimates show that nearly 40% of all traffic fatalities are alcohol-related. This translates to nearly 640 alcohol-related automobile deaths in Chicago from 1910 to 1930, a proportion 30 times higher than that recorded by police at the time.

Why such a discrepancy? While the ability to detect alcohol in drivers likely played a major role, other forces have influenced the detection and acknowledgement of alcohol as a risk factor for traffic fatalities. Some possibilities include societal inexperience with the automobile; the infancy of traffic safety education, regulation and enforcement; the lack of evidence about alcohol’s affect on driving; and societal concern with other issues of the day. The purpose of this study is to explore, in greater depth, how alcohol was framed and understood in relation to the automobile and to traffic fatalities in Chicago between 1910 and 1930. Key questions include:

1. What role did alcohol play in traffic fatalities where alcohol was identified in the police report? Was alcohol acknowledged as a contributing factor to the traffic fatality?
2. What were the print media and public’s responses to traffic fatalities when alcohol was involved (as compared to traffic fatalities not involving alcohol)?
3. Did the emergence of prohibition in 1920 change the way alcohol was framed and understood in relation to traffic safety?

Data for this project comes from multiple sources including police reports for traffic fatalities from the Chicago Historical Homicide Project, as well as print media (i.e. Chicago Tribune), and other public documents, between the years 1910 and 1930. Mixed methods will be employed, starting with a content analysis of police reports for the 21 traffic fatalities involving alcohol, along with a matched (day of fatality, gender of victim) set of 42 traffic fatalities not involving alcohol. The goal will be to draw out major themes surrounding alcohol’s role, or lack of, in traffic-related deaths. Further analyses will be performed on the print media reporting (if available) for all 63 traffic fatalities, focusing on the two days following the date of the fatality.

This historical study will extend our understanding of societal perceptions of the role of alcohol in traffic safety and the emergence of drinking and driving as a social problem. In particular, study results may shed light on some of the main barriers that prevented the recognition of the role of alcohol in traffic collisions and fatalities.

Keywords: Alcohol, Traffic fatalities, History