Female Impaired Drivers:
A Review of the Literature and Qualitative Study in Four States

Robyn Robertson
Traffic Injury Research Foundation
Erin Holmes
Traffic Injury Research Foundation
Kyla Marcoux
Traffic Injury Research Foundation
Ward Vanlaar
Traffic Injury Research Foundation

Abstract

Background
There have been dramatic increases in arrests among female impaired drivers, and smaller increases in alcohol-impaired crashes. Limited progress in reducing this problem, particularly in light of substantial declines among male drunk drivers, warrants further attention and concern.

Aims
The Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) was contracted by The Century Council to review the literature and conduct a qualitative study on female impaired drivers. The purpose was to determine what is known about this issue, what gaps in knowledge exist, and to begin to address some of those gaps and provide insight into needed strategies to improve the management of these offenders.

Methods
The project methodology was based on a multi-faceted design including a literature review, and the analysis available data sources, focus groups with first and repeat offenders, and key informant interviews with experienced practitioners in four states. Participants in this study included 154 convicted female impaired drivers and 36 criminal justice and treatment practitioners.

Results
The magnitude of this problem has changed in the past decade based on different measures of the problem, although reasons for this are unclear. While female drunk drivers share some common characteristics with males, there are also important differences including patterns of alcohol consumption and alcohol problems, use of drugs, presence of mental health issues, treatment engagement and barriers to treatment entry. Frontline practitioners encounter several challenges in dealing with these offenders including a lack of knowledge about this population, and a lack of targeted programs.

Discussion and conclusions
The findings from this study provide a more complete picture of this problem today and guidance to inform the development of more effective strategies to ensure female drunk drivers are subject to effective and appropriate interventions that reduce offending.
Background

Historically, impaired driving has been considered a predominantly male problem (Mayhew et al. 1990; Kelley-Baker and Romano 2010). However, female involvement in drunk driving has been a source of growing concern since the late 1980s (Argeriou et al. 1986; Underhill 1986) as impaired driving arrest numbers for women and involvement of females in alcohol impaired crashes have increased in North America and elsewhere (Robertson et al. 2011; Tsai et al. 2010; Waller 1997). This issue has recently received further attention as a number of women have been arrested in high-profile drunk driving cases, most notably Diane Schuler who drove, with her children in her van, the wrong way down the Taconic State Parkway in New York and killed eight people (four of whom were children).

Several explanations for this increase have been put forward including changes in the societal roles of women (e.g., more women driving as a result of an increased number of women entering the workforce), changes in social norms that make it more acceptable for women to drink, and changes in social control mechanisms (e.g., more female law enforcement officers and lowering the legal breath alcohol concentration (BAC) limit from 0.10% to 0.08%). Regardless of the cause of the increase, more attention to this issue is warranted to increase understanding of the problem and ways that it can be addressed.

Much of the available research examines male impaired driving offenders who represent the majority of this problem. Limited research has been conducted involving female impaired drivers, and, since much of it was conducted more than twenty years ago, it does not provide an accurate or complete picture of female impaired drivers today. More concerning, it provides limited insight into effective programs and interventions specific to this population.

As such, current gaps in the state of knowledge must be addressed in an effort to better understand the nature of female impaired driving offending, the characteristics of this population, and ways to prevent re-offending using tailored, appropriate and effective interventions.

Aims

To address these existing gaps in knowledge and provide a current snapshot of the female impaired driving problem, the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) conducted a two-stage study. The first stage, undertaken in 2011, involved an extensive review of the research literature that focused mainly on North American and some Western studies. The purpose was to determine what was currently known about the problem.

The second stage, conducted in 2012, was designed to further build upon this knowledge base and increase understanding of this problem. There are three main objectives of this latter study. First, it was designed to explore the life histories of convicted female drunk drivers and the ways that their history may contribute to their offending. Second, the study was structured to examine women's subsequent experiences in the criminal justice and treatment systems. Finally, the third objective of this study was to explore the experiences of criminal justice and treatment professionals in supervising this offender population. Collectively, these data can be used to
enhance our knowledge of female drunk drivers. It is underscored that this study was designed as a hypothesis-generating exercise as opposed to a hypothesis-testing one.

**Methods**

The literature review included research that pertained to the magnitude of the female drunk driver problem (e.g., self-report data, arrest and conviction data, involvement in impaired driving interventions and alcohol-crash data), the characteristics of these offenders (e.g., demographic information, substance use and mental health issues, criminal history and recidivism), and what is known about effective strategies to manage this population.

A multi-faceted research design was utilized for the second stage of this study. It included focus groups with first and repeat offenders to explore their attitudes, behaviors, characteristics, risks and needs, and pathways to offending as well as their experiences within the criminal justice and treatment systems. Key informant interviews were also conducted with experienced criminal justice and treatment practitioners to identify how female drunk drivers are managed within these systems and what has been learned from their experiences supervising and treating them.

Discussion guides were developed for both offender focus groups and key informant interviews to elicit relevant information regarding priority topics. Guides were peer-reviewed by an experienced researcher and probation officer.

Data were collected between July and November 2012 with cooperation from the National Center for DWI Courts (NCDC) and the American Probation and Parole Association (APPA). Focus groups and interviews were conducted in four states – California, Michigan, Missouri and New York. These states were chosen to provide a geographically representative sample of the United States. Slightly more than half of the offenders who participated in this study were located in urban areas whereas slightly less than half represented rural jurisdictions. In contrast, key informant interviews almost equally represented urban and rural jurisdictions.

Focus group participants were invited to volunteer to participate in the groups by the criminal justice practitioner responsible for their supervision (typically a probation officer) in lieu of a regularly scheduled meeting with the practitioner. Each participant also received information about the group and it was underscored that all information shared during the focus groups would be anonymous and not directly attributed to any individual.

In total, there were 154 convicted female impaired driving offenders (both first and repeat) who participated in 15 focus groups which ranged in size from five to 15 participants. There were also

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1 Hypotheses can be generated in exploratory research whereas empirical data are gathered to test existing hypotheses in confirmatory research. The current study and its applied methods were conducive to the generation of such hypotheses, rather than testing them. To truly test them (i.e., reject or accept), more data are needed.

2 Specialty problem-solving courts such as DWI courts and drug courts are more widespread in the United States than in Canada. For more information about these courts please see the National Association of Drug Court Professionals and the National DWI Court Center at [www.nadcp.org](http://www.nadcp.org) and [www.ncdc.org](http://www.ncdc.org).
four additional in-depth individual interviews with female drunk drivers that were conducted primarily by phone with one being conducted in-person as well as a select survey of 28 female impaired drivers. Participants ranged in age from late teens to mid-60s, and the number of prior impaired driving offenses varied from one to seven with the average being two or three. Participants equally represented offenders processed in traditional courts and DWI courts.

Two researchers were present in each of these focus groups and they each recorded their own notes to document discussion; interviews were conducted by just one researcher. The use of a recording device and associated software to capture and analyze discussion in each of the groups had been considered as part of the original study design, however, this was not pursued in order to protect and preserve the anonymity of the participants and to ensure a comfortable setting for open discussion to enhance the quality of the data. The data that are reported are estimates that were developed based upon the detailed notes gathered by both researchers reflecting discussion in each of the focus groups. Overall, the notes produced by each researcher were highly consistent and contained similar information and observations.

The key informant interviews involved a total of 36 individuals representing judges (3), defense attorneys (2), probation officers (24), alcohol education providers (3) and treatment counselors (4). The practitioners included in this study represented frontline professionals as well as managers and supervisors. While some practitioners had just two or three years of experience in their field, the majority of them had between ten and 30 years of experience.

All of the collected data were used to identify key themes as well as lessons learned, and to formulate recommendations to improve the supervision of these female offenders and the delivery of services to them in the criminal justice and treatment systems. Drafts of this report were peer-reviewed by knowledgeable practitioners and experts in the field to gain their feedback and input on the content of the report and the recommendations put forward.

**Results**

**Literature review.** Although female self-report data on drinking and driving and crash data reveal that there has been little change in female involvement in drinking and driving in the past three decades, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of women arrested for drunk driving in just the past decade. Moreover, while male and female drunk drivers share some common characteristics, there are also some important differences. Females are more likely to be single, separated or divorced, and to have custody of children. They also are more likely to suffer from mental health issues such as anxiety or depression, and use drugs in addition to alcohol. More concerning, women experience a more rapid progression of alcohol dependence, and require medical intervention an average of four years earlier than males who are problem drinkers (Gudrais 2011). These differences may have important implications for the delivery of impaired driving interventions and treatment for women.

**Focus groups.** Several key findings and common themes emerged from the data collected in the four jurisdictions. In terms of the demographics of this offender population, focus group participants ranged in age from late teens to mid-60s, suggesting that women of all ages are involved in impaired driving. Some of these participants did not experience involvement in drinking and driving at a young age, but instead only began to engage in this behavior much later.
in life. The family background of these women varied considerably as did the level of education that they attained. A majority of the focus group participants indicated they were employed; those who were not reported it was difficult to be hired as a result of prior arrests or because of scheduling demands placed on them in relation to supervision.

More than half of the women were single, separated, or divorced and the majority had children. Approximately one-third of the participants stated that they had some type of support network in the form of either family or friends that enabled them to comply with the demands of parenting, employment and the requirements of supervision. A large majority of women that participated in the focus groups reported that their impaired driving arrest was precipitated by a major life stressor such as a domestic argument, the end of a relationship, the loss of a job or child custody, or the illness or death of a parent or other family member.

Mental health issues were frequently reported with more than half of the focus group participants indicating they had one or more prescription medications for disorders such as anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and bipolar disorder. There were many instances of undiagnosed mental health issues and histories of trauma and/or abuse (both physical and sexual). Illicit drug use was uncommon and less than one-third of the participants reported use of illicit substances of which marijuana and methamphetamines were the most common. Often illicit drug use was connected to a partner or spouse who also used drugs.

With regard to the BACs of focus group participants, a number of women reported that their BAC was shockingly high and BACs of 0.25%, 0.3%, and 0.42% were not uncommon, although, unlike males, among women it was generally a source of shame or embarrassment.

Three different profiles of this population generally emerged:

- Younger women involved in socializing and social activities;
- Recently married women with young children; and,
- Divorced women, “empty nesters”, or women who have a parent with a debilitating health problem or who recently died.

It is estimated that at least one-third of participants spent time in jail or prison (ranging from one week to five years) as a result of their sentence for impaired driving, and/or for subsequent violations of court or probation supervision. With few exceptions, almost all of the women reported that jail and/or prison was a frightening experience that merely desensitized them.

Perhaps most notably, a majority of participants reported that information about the requirements of their supervision, the length of their supervision, their eligibility for certain privileges (e.g., a driver’s license), or the potential consequences for non-compliance generally lacked clarity or were unclear. A large majority of study participants consistently agreed that the level of respect, support, and communication they receive from criminal justice practitioners can make the difference between their success and failure. While an estimated one-quarter of the study participants noted that it was preferable to have a female practitioner supervise them, a larger proportion reported that their ability to develop a good rapport with them was more important.
It is estimated that more than half of the participants reported challenges specifically in relation to compliance with random testing requirements. While almost all of the females participating in this study reported that treatment had a positive impact on their lives, they also identified significant gaps in the treatment system including insufficient and inadequate services and cost.

With regard to their current situation, between one-half and two-thirds of study participants reported having little or no support system that they could rely upon following their impaired driving arrest to help them manage the requirements of their supervision. An estimated three-quarters of women noted that transportation was very challenging.

Undoubtedly, the most prevalent theme that consistently emerged was that women often defined their experiences in the criminal justice and treatment systems in terms of the emotional effects. Overall, findings from key informant interviews were highly similar, and practitioners reported that there are some important differences in the use of supervision and treatment strategies for female impaired drivers.

Discussion and conclusions

There appear to be some distinct differences in characteristics and the experiences of female drunk drivers as compared to their male counterparts. Recommendations include a focus on prevention to target school-aged women with education about drinking and its effects and increased efforts to identify emotional problems, mental disorders, or difficult living circumstances. Improvements to the justice system underscore ongoing accountability, recognition of progress and compliance, flexibility in scheduling and more education for practitioners about addiction and social services. Recommended improvements for the treatment system include more female-only services and opportunities to integrate treatment and real life. The findings from this study provide a more complete picture of this problem today and guidance to inform the development of more effective strategies to ensure female drunk drivers are subject to effective and appropriate interventions that reduce offending.

References


