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McKenzie Law Firm Teen Drinking and Driving Prevention PSA Scholarship  
Scholarship Essay

Prompt:

In the essay, the student should focus on why he or she believes some teenagers continue to drink and drive, even though they are aware of the dangers of this type of reckless behavior. The essay also should explain ideas the student has to help alleviate the situation. This essay must be at least 1,000 words.

Response:

I believe that teenagers and young adults continue to drink and drive due to a combination of underestimating the risks to themselves and others and not having sufficient deterrents that would prevent them from engaging in this dangerous behavior in the first place. Unfortunately, it seems the first significant deterrent faced by many impaired drivers is a catastrophic injury to themselves or others.

According to the CDC, one person dies every 50 minutes from motor vehicle crashes that involve an alcohol-impaired driver. The annual cost of all alcohol-related crashes is more than \$44 billion, according to a 2015 study. In 2016, 28% of all traffic-related deaths in the United States were due to alcohol impairment. With this tremendous social cost resulting from impaired driving, our society should be very heavily incentivized to take action to address this significant issue.

Unfortunately, we can see from the evidence that we are not doing enough to address impaired driving. In 2016, while 1 million drivers were arrested for impaired driving, that 1 million is only around 1% of the number who self-report driving while alcohol-impaired, suggesting we are not intervening enough to sufficiently deter individuals from engaging in this dangerous behavior. In addition, the efforts to legalize or decriminalize recreational drugs with psychologically impairing effects are likely to increase the potential for impaired driving episodes. This greater potential for impaired driving, especially when the impairment involves something other than alcohol, suggests that we need to work hard to identify effective ways to discourage impaired driving regardless of what is causing the impairment. By preventing impaired driving, we can effectively protect these impaired potential drivers and the communities they put in danger with their unsafe driving behaviors.

Fortunately, health organizations have studied impaired driving and have identified effective strategies to prevent it. Research has indicated that actively enforcing existing BAC laws, minimum legal drinking age laws, and zero tolerance laws for drivers younger than 21 years old in all states effectively prevents deaths and injuries from impaired driving. In addition, requiring ignition interlocks for all offenders, including first-time offenders, is an effective way of reducing alcohol-impaired driving. Widespread use of sobriety checkpoints is also a valuable strategy to prevent impaired driving

and limit its negative consequences. Requiring mandatory substance abuse assessment and treatment, if needed, for impaired-driving offenders is also an effective tool. I believe our society should make treatment programs for substance abuse as widespread and as easily accessible as possible. Providing easy access to substance abuse treatment seems to be a very effective method for improving public health and public safety. In addition, to be successful at reducing impaired driving incidents, we need to make sure that the tools we have validated to prevent drunk driving are extended to other impairing substances as well.

Other evidence-based and effective community-based interventions include increasing the tax on alcohol to make it more costly to become impaired in the first place. Additionally, emphasizing public health promotion that includes economic, organizational, policy, and school/community action has been found to be very effective at reducing deaths and injuries from impaired driving, as have community-based approaches concerning alcohol control and DWI prevention. Hopefully, the wealth of research on preventing alcohol-related impaired driving can be extended to effectively address impaired driving resulting from all substances. However, we need to provide adequate research funding to allow this evidence-based extension to occur.

Fortunately, it seems that our society's efforts to prevent teenage and young adult drunk driving have been effective over time. Based on November 2019 statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Fatality Analysis Reporting System (NHTSA/FARS), between the 2009-2018 period, there was a 28.3% reduction in alcohol-impaired driving fatalities per 100,000 people in the under 21 age group. This reduction suggests that efforts to target teenagers and young adults are important, effective, and will hopefully instill safe driving habits in these individuals that will last throughout their lifetimes. However, there was only an 8.4% drop in alcohol-impaired driving fatalities per 100,000 people overall during this same 2009-2018 period. This discrepancy suggests that the older members of our community may be more at risk of impaired driving than their younger counterparts or may have the potential to face greater risk if they are not effectively targeted with public health efforts. As a result, this age discrepancy in alcohol-impaired fatality reduction may warrant devoting more resources to developing effective strategies to deter impaired driving outside of the teenage and young adult age group.

At the individual level, we can all take steps to reduce the risk of becoming an impaired driver or enabling those we love to become impaired drivers themselves. Personally, I find that my most effective strategy to avoid becoming impaired is to abstain from impairing substances entirely. As a result, I am often able to serve as the non-using designated driver when with individuals interested in enjoying substances that have the potential for impairment. Additionally, I strive to prevent those around me from driving while impaired by ensuring they have a safe ride home both before and after a potentially impairing experience. Furthermore, at social events that I have control over, I try to avoid serving substances with the potential to impair others. In this way, I attempt to do my part to model safe and responsible behaviors around impairing substances and help those around me avoid the preventable consequences of impairment.

Unfortunately, even outside of impairing substances, drowsy driving seems to be a potential source of traffic accidents that warrants our attention. The research I have seen that seems to indicate drowsy driving accidents are likely very underreported as it is less easily measured than substance-impaired driving is particularly troubling. At a personal level, I work very hard to avoid driving when I am in any way sleep-deprived, and I try my best to promote awareness of the risk of drowsy driving and the importance of preventing drowsy driving with those in our community. I hope that efforts to help ensure individuals prioritize and obtain adequate sleep will continue, especially in younger drivers

who tend to have a greater need for sleep. In addition, I hope that society continues to prioritize identifying and implementing effective strategies for preventing drowsy driving and drowsy driving accidents.

As an aspiring computer science student, I also hope to address impaired driving more broadly. I believe the implementation of self-driving vehicles is likely to be an effective solution to impaired driving, as it takes the impaired driver out of the equation entirely. Ideally, we can find a way to incorporate self-driving vehicles into a robust public transportation landscape to make sure we serve as many members of our community as possible. One way of doing so is by using environmentally friendly and autonomous electric vehicles to reduce pollution while making public transportation both safer and more accessible. In this way, we may reduce the number of vehicles on the road entirely, thus reducing the number of potential traffic fatalities and injuries our community is forced to endure.

Regrettably, rural traffic accidents are often more deadly due to their remote nature. As rural traffic accidents are often more harmful, rural impaired driving is likely even more dangerous to drivers and their communities. Expanding safe, affordable transit options in rural settings seems to be another valuable solution to reduce impaired driving incidents and their often tragic aftermath. Unfortunately, at present, rural areas are not reliably served by public transit, causing potential drivers who become impaired in these more remote settings to be at seemingly greater risk to themselves and their community. This discrepancy and lack of access suggest that our community should ensure we do not overlook promoting safe, accessible rural transportation and reducing the risks of rural impaired driving.

I look forward to continuing to work, both personally and professionally, to address the critical issue of impaired driving and help improve the health of our community. Thank you for bringing attention to this vital public health issue and for being willing to support students as we work to help serve our communities.