

### The Kids Are (Going to Be) Alright

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, car crashes are the number one cause of death for teenagers, and about a quarter of all fatal crashes involve an underage driver who had been drinking. Alcohol famously impairs thinking, reasoning, and muscle coordination, yet people continue to drive with these essential abilities incapacitated. With so much information available about the dangers, who do so many teenagers still drink and drive?

Adolescence is a time of rapid change and expansion, and exposure to alcohol is part of that exploration for the majority of teenagers. Understanding why teenagers drink is a pivotal step in understanding why they drive impaired. Alcohol consumption by minors is tied to a desire for independence and freedom. Overwhelming, teenagers drink for experiential reasons: they want to have the worldly experience of knowing what “being drunk” is like, not to pair the right glass of wine with a main course. With that as the ultimate goal, teenagers are the age group most likely to engage in binge drinking. While any amount of alcohol is dangerous on the road, rates of fatal crashes increase exponentially at BAC levels above 0.08. Teens view their driver’s license in much the same way as drinking: it is a gateway to freedom and adulthood. Because of their combined inexperience with both alcohol and driving, a perfect storm of danger is created for drunk-driving accidents.

Despite the teenage desire for independence, everyone is a product of their upbringing. When they get behind the wheel of the car, teenagers value their own observations about the behaviors adults have modeled for them. Suppose a child is at a gathering with his parents. One parent has three drinks, and the other has only one. When it is time to go home, the parent who has only had one drink offers to drive, as it is “safer”. Not only does this normalize drinking and

driving, it teaches him that it can be a good, responsible choice. Even one drink is dangerous for a teen driver, but if he believes that driving while “buzzed” is acceptable, it isn’t a stretch for him to engage in riskier behavior, especially once that one drink of alcohol has started to limit his inhibitions.

A common stereotype of teenagers is that they don’t understand risk or somehow they believe they are immortal. According to research explored by science writer David Hobbs, this is not quite true. Teenagers are able to assess and understand risk as well as adults. However, they tend to value other things more highly. Risky behaviors, like joyriding, not buckling up, or substance experimentation, have benefits to teenagers that they perceive as outweighing the risks. Peer pressure is a very real factor in the decision-making processes of adolescent minds. The NHTSA found that teenage drivers were more than twice as likely to engage in one or more potentially risky behaviors when driving with another teenager rather than driving alone. Furthermore, engaging in risky behaviors triples with multiple passengers of their own age group. Overall, statistics show that chances of a deadly crash are directly correlated to the number of teenagers in a car.

While fear of an accident isn’t a big deterrent, there is good news: penalties are. Consequences include a trip to jail, loss of licensure, fines and legal fees, and insurance hikes, not to mention the overarching fear of social stigma and parental punishment. Even minors under the age of 18 are frequently charged as adults for DUI convictions, which go on their permanent adult records. Fear of arrest in particular is the greatest. There can also be a loss of academic standings, college enrollment, and scholarships and fellowships. Losing social standing as well as their newly found freedom is debilitating for young adults, so anything that can be done to

highlight the penalizations of drinking and driving is a far better tactic than focusing on personal safety.

While it's illegal in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico to get behind the wheel with a Blood Alcohol Concentration (BAC) of .08 or higher, even a small amount of alcohol can be deadly. 2,266 people were killed in alcohol-related crashes where a driver had a BAC of .01 to .07 in 2021 – a level of alcohol which is perfectly legal. Our country could implement lower BAC limits to discourage social acceptance of “buzzed” driving. Countries with BAC limits set at 0.05 or lower have fewer alcohol-related traffic deaths on average than the United States. Knowing that driving “buzzed” is as likely to have consequences as driving “drunk” also serves as a strong deterrent, even among those at the highest risk of engaging in impaired driving. In Utah, they have already instituted a BAC limit of 0.05, and it led to an 18% decrease in deadly crashes per mile in its first year, as well as a lowered risk of non-fatal drunk-driving crashes. Additionally, police departments could enforce more checkpoints. Publicized sobriety checkpoints are highly visible locations where police can briefly stop vehicles to check for drunk drivers. When well-publicized through the media and regularly conducted, they have a great effect on impaired drivers' willingness to get behind the wheel. Similarly, high-visibility saturation patrols in specific, risky areas can help reduce dangerous driving behaviors, particularly if well-advertised and enforced. These very noticeable and intimidating deterrents could be one of the most effective ways of curbing drunk-driving, as it puts the thing teens react most strongly to – the loss of their freedom – on the line in front of them.

Social campaigns have proven themselves to be a surprisingly effective technique in the fight against impaired driving. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has run

several compelling campaigns with national coverage, but I believe campaigns could be more promising if they were contributed to by content creators that teenagers genuinely respect and care about. Alternative transportation could also save many lives, but it needs a good deal more support nationwide. In my opinion, affordable and accessible public transportation is the most viable solution to most forms of drunk driving. Unfortunately, many cities have public transit systems that are woefully limited in range, surprisingly expensive, and have limited working hours. In many parts of the country, there are no public transportation systems at all, particularly at night. If the nighttime and weekend public transportation hours were expanded, and the frequency of buses increased, impaired citizens across all age groups would have much better options.

As a teacher, I naturally value education, but one area where I feel that we are lacking as a country is parental education. In a study conducted by Students Against Drunk Driving and Liberty Mutual, it was found that parents regularly set a poor example for teens by engaging in unsafe driving behaviors in front of them. 41% of teens say their parents continue unsafe behaviors even after asking them to stop, and 28% of teens say their parents go on to justify their unsafe practices. This is a dangerous situation for the teenagers to be in, and it has a secondary negative effect of reinforcing in the young adults' mind that they can indulge in unsafe behaviors if they can "handle it" somehow. Additionally, parents should be taught how to create an environment where their children feel comfortable reaching out about problems. It is critical that teenagers have an adult in their life that they can contact to get out of unpleasant situations without fear of reprisals. Even risk-averse teenagers find themselves in situations where they feel socially trapped into dangerous behavior, like getting into a car with a friend who has been drinking, and the social consequences of confrontation can outweigh the very real physical risk

to their person. Of course, I also know how important a school-based instructional program can be at reaching young people. It is important to instill these values early, long before driver's ed takes place, especially to counteract poor behavior modeling at home. At school, educators have a unique opportunity to reach students repeatedly. They can present teens with the harsh realities of the consequences of reckless behavior – with a primary focus on what they can lose – as well as ideas and options for how to get out of tough situations without losing face. It is also a great opportunity for coaches, teachers, or counselors to reach out and offer themselves as a lifeline for students who might feel like they have no one to call. Every teen needs the option of a safe ride home, no questions asked.

The situation is not without hope. With the helpful combination of better education, less social acceptance, and harsher punishments, teenage drunk-driving has decreased by more than half in the last few decades. Every state has adopted a minimum legal drinking age of 21, which the NHTSA estimates saved 31,959 lives from 1975 to 2017. However, every 39 minutes, someone in the United States is killed due to drunk driving. Until we can curb this behavior entirely among adults, it is likely we will continue to see these reckless behaviors imitated by teenagers – the very group most likely to be killed.