

Over the Limit: New report aims to reduce DUI deaths

Joshua Vaughn The Sentinel Jan 26, 2018



Volunteer John Breeding Of The East Pennsboro Fire Police, Right, Is Administered A Breathalyzer Test by Sgt. Todd Lindsay Of The Silver Spring Township Police In 2015.

Jason Malmont, The Sentinel

More than 44,000 cases of DUI were filed in Pennsylvania, excluding Philadelphia, in 2016, according to an analysis of court records conducted by The Sentinel.

Of those, about 16,000 involved a defendant with a blood alcohol content more than twice the legal limit, court records show.

DUI was one of the most prevalent crimes charged in the state, accounting for more than 20 percent of all cases outside of Philadelphia, according to The Sentinel's analysis.

Along with these arrests, nearly 300 people died in Pennsylvania in alcohol-related crashes in that same year, according to PennDOT.

After years of progress, the number of lives lost to drunk driving recently stagnated and has begun to rise nationwide, according to the National Academies of Science.

While still well below levels seen in the 1980s, more than 10,000 people died in drunk-driving crashes in the United States in 2016, according to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration.

"Ten thousand deaths a year. We need to do much more than we are doing," said David Jernigan, associate professor at Johns Hopkins School of Public Health. "We can get distracted by distracted driving and drugged driving and in both of those, the deaths from alcohol-impaired driving are three times higher."

Jernigan was a committee member for a new National Academies of Science report titled "Getting to Zero Alcohol-Impaired Driving Fatalities."

The report looked at multiple ways to reduce the number of people killed in alcohol-impaired crashes.

Alcohol tax

The single most effective way to reduce alcohol consumption and, in turn, alcohol-related crashes is to increase the cost to drink by raising the alcohol tax, Jernigan said.

Currently, taxes average about 10 to 15 cents per drink. However, the social costs for things like criminal justice resources and public health effects are closer to roughly \$2 per drink, he said.

“There is a big gap there for alcohol ever paying for itself,” Jernigan said. “On the federal level, the current taxes have already lost about 40 percent of their value since they were last raised in 1991 and in the recent tax cut package, Congress cut them another roughly 16 percent.”

Jernigan said the current taxes account for about 5 percent of the cost of a drink. The report suggests taxes should be raised to account for about 30 percent.

The report said research shows that increasing the alcohol tax decreases demand for alcohol, which in turn decreases excessive alcohol consumption.

It is excessive, or “binge,” drinking that creates the most problems, Jernigan said.

In 2010, alcohol misuse cost the United States more than \$249 billion, and nearly three quarters was a result of binge drinking, according to the National Institutes of Health.

Lowering the limit

Another major component to the NAS report is lowering the legal blood alcohol content for driving from the current 0.08 percent to 0.05 percent.

This means the threshold to be charged with a DUI would be 0.05 percent.

Jernigan said most European nations have a DUI threshold at the recommended level and it has resulted in a decrease in alcohol-related crashes and deaths.

He said similar results occurred when the U.S. lowered the limit from 0.1 percent to 0.08 percent.

“It happened with 0.08. We would expect it to happen with 0.05,” Jernigan said. “It’s got a normative effect where people realize the threshold has gotten tighter.”

He said this causes people to regulate their drinking.

But what about the people who drink well beyond the legal limit?

More than half of all drivers charged with DUI in Pennsylvania in 2016 had a blood alcohol content above 0.1, according to court records.

Jernigan said lowering the limit creates a cascade effect and would be expected to pull down even the amount of alcohol consumed by heavy drinkers.

Other solutions

The study provides a host of other recommendations ranging from autonomous vehicles — which Jernigan said will likely have a large impact on DUI crashes but is likely several decades away — to requiring everyone charged with a DUI to have an ignition interlock system installed in their vehicle.

Marketing is also key to reducing alcohol-related crashes, Jernigan said.

The study recommends limiting alcohol marketing and specifically limiting marketing to minors and those below the legal drinking age.

Nearly 28 percent of all fatal alcohol-related crashes involved a person between the ages of 21 and 25, according to the study.

“This is hugely out of proportion to the presence in the population,” Jernigan said. “If you are getting a car crash because of drink at 21, it’s likely because you started drinking much earlier.”

In Pennsylvania, roughly 27 percent of all DUI arrests involved a person between 18 and 25 years old, despite that group accounting for only about 10 percent of the state’s population, according to The Sentinel analysis.

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