NTSB Most Wanted List

Critical changes needed to reduce transportation accidents and save lives.

Eliminate Substance-Impaired Driving

The National Transportation Safety Board is an independent Federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident the United States and significant accidents in other modes of transportation – railroad, highway, marine and pipeline. The NTSB determines the probable cause of the accidents and issues safety recommendations aimed at preventing future accidents. In addition, the NTSB carries out special studies concerning transportation safety and coordinates the resources of the Federal Government and other organizations to provide assistance to victims and their family members impacted by major transportation disasters.

National Transportation Safety Board

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Eliminate Substance-Impaired Driving

What is the issue?

For more than 30 years, we have known that the consequences of drinking and driving are deadly. In fact, for the last 15 years, one-third of highway deaths have involved an alcohol-impaired driver. People impaired by alcohol are at a substantially greater risk of being involved in a traffic crash, and those crashes frequently result in injuries or deaths. Impairment does not start when a person's blood alcohol concentration reaches 0.08 percent; it begins with that first drink.

Impaired driving is not just about alcohol. Drugs can also affect your driving ability. Illegal, prescription, or over-the-counter drugs can have impairing side effects. This problem is all the more frightening because drugs can affect each person differently.

What can be done . . .

There are numerous variables on why people use substances and how these substances affect driving. Eliminating substance-impaired driving requires a comprehensive solution, starting with basic concepts for changing behavior. General deterrence encourages the general population not to engage in the dangerous behavior in the first place. It includes such measures as high visibility enforcement and administrative license revocation. Specific deterrence is used after a person is caught and focuses on preventing repeat behavior. Examples include fines and jail terms, but in cases where the impaired driver has a substance-abuse problem, neither fines nor incarceration addresses the root cause of recidivism.

Successful programs should include assessment for substance abuse and treatment when warranted. Alternatives to jail, such as home detention with electronic monitoring or intensive supervision probation, allow offenders to maintain employment and obtain treatment while still holding them accountable for the underlying crime. Technology also holds great promise. Ignition interlocks and continuous alcohol monitoring devices can prevent an impaired driver from getting behind the wheel. Developing new technology that can quickly and effectively test drivers for drugs is also critical. The key is to establish a comprehensive toolbox and tailor the program to the specific offender's situation.

Statistics

More people die on the highways than in any other mode of transportation. In fact, over 90 percent of all transportation-related deaths occur on highways. Unfortunately, the substance-impaired driver greatly contributes to this average. For example, in 2010, more than 10,000 deaths (30 percent of all highway deaths) involved an alcohol-impaired driver. Over the last decade, 130,000 people have died in crashes involving an alcohol-impaired driver—20,000 more than the number of seats at the University of Michigan football stadium! According to the 2011 Traffic Safety Culture Index of the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, over 14 percent of drivers admit to driving when they thought they were close to or over the legal limit.

The statistics for drugged driving are no less concerning. According to the 2009 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, roughly 10.5 million people age 12 and above admitted to driving while impaired by illicit drugs. And among drivers fatally injured in 2009 who were tested for drugs and for whom results were known, one-third tested positive. From 2005–2009, the proportion of fatally injured drivers who tested positive for illicit drugs rose from 13 to 18 percent. The battle against substance-impaired driving is far from over.

For more information, visit **www.ntsb.gov/mostwanted**