

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
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(Information subject to editing)

Safety Report
Reaching Zero: Actions to Eliminate Alcohol-Impaired Driving

NTSB/SR-13/01

This is a synopsis from the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) report and does not include the NTSB's rationale for the conclusions, and safety recommendations. The NTSB's staff is currently making final revisions to the report from which the attached conclusions and safety recommendations have been extracted. The final report and pertinent safety recommendation letters will be distributed to recommendation recipients as soon as possible. Further information can be found on the NTSB web site at:

http://www.nts.gov/news/events/2013/eliminate_impaired_driving/index.html

The attached information is subject to further review and editing.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The NTSB has long been concerned about alcohol-impaired driving, which accounts for approximately one-third of all US highway fatalities. In the past several decades, awareness of the dangers of alcohol-impaired driving has increased. Public and private entities focusing on this safety issue have changed social perceptions concerning alcohol-impaired driving; they have also achieved important legislative actions to help reduce it. Due to these efforts, the number of lives lost annually in alcohol-impaired-driver-related crashes declined 53 percent, from 21,113 in 1982 to 9,878 in 2011; and the percentage of highway fatalities resulting from alcohol-involved crashes is down from 48 percent in 1982 to about 31 percent today.

In recent years, however, US success in addressing this safety issue has plateaued. Since 1995, although the annual number of fatalities has declined, nearly one in three of all highway deaths still involves an alcohol-impaired driver. The cause of these deaths is well understood and preventable, yet even the most concerted efforts have not kept thousands of lives from being lost each year. If traditional methods are no longer reducing the problem, new—and possibly challenging—initiatives must be considered.

In this safety report, the NTSB—

- Describes the scope of the impaired driving problem;
- Summarizes the efforts of advocacy groups, researchers, law enforcement agencies, traffic safety groups, public health organizations, legislators, justice departments, and motor vehicle agencies, as well as federal, state, and local governments, to reduce the number of crashes, injuries, and fatalities;

- Examines the effect of alcohol consumption on an individual’s ability to operate a motor vehicle and on the risk of being involved in a crash; and
- Evaluates the effectiveness of current and emerging alcohol-impaired driving countermeasures and identifies new approaches and actions needed to reduce and ultimately eliminate alcohol-impaired driving.

The recommendations in this report represent the culmination of a year-long NTSB effort focused on the problem of substance-impaired driving. In May 2012, the NTSB held a forum, “Reaching Zero: Actions to Eliminate Substance-Impaired Driving,” to identify the most effective, scientifically based actions needed to reach zero crashes associated with substance-impaired driving. Numerous impaired driving countermeasures were discussed at the forum, including laws, enforcement strategies, adjudication programs, substance treatment programs, alcohol ignition interlocks, passive alcohol detection systems, and educational campaigns. Forum presenters discussed the merits and drawbacks of these countermeasures, as well as challenges associated with reducing deaths due to impaired driving. Following the forum, the NTSB issued a series of safety recommendations to address the need for improved data related to substance-impaired driving.¹ In December 2012, the NTSB adopted a special investigation report concerning wrong-way driving on limited access highways. Alcohol-impaired driving was identified as the leading cause of wrong-way crashes, and important safety recommendations related to alcohol ignition interlocks and Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety (DADSS) technology were included in the special investigation report.

This safety report addresses the necessity of providing all the following elements to achieve meaningful reductions in alcohol-impaired driving crashes: stronger laws, improved enforcement strategies, innovative adjudication programs, and accelerated development of new in-vehicle alcohol detection technologies. Moreover, the report recognizes the need for states to identify specific and measurable goals for reducing impaired driving fatalities and injuries, and to evaluate the effectiveness of implemented countermeasures on an ongoing basis.

Specifically, the report makes recommendations to the states in the following safety issue areas:

- Reducing the per se blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit for all drivers,
- Conducting high-visibility enforcement of impaired driving laws and incorporating passive alcohol sensing technology into enforcement efforts,
- Expanding the use of in-vehicle devices to prevent operation by an impaired driver,
- Using driving while intoxicated (DWI) courts and other programs to reduce recidivism by repeat DWI offenders, and
- Establishing measurable goals for reducing impaired driving and tracking progress toward those goals.

¹ These letters addressed data needs concerning both drug- and alcohol-impaired driving, as components of substance-impaired driving. Although the NTSB recognizes that drugged driving continues to be a serious safety threat, the current report focuses on alcohol-impaired driving.

On the federal side, the report recommends that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) support state efforts by seeking authority to award incentive grants to states for establishing per se BAC limits of 0.05 or lower and by establishing best practices for alcohol ignition interlock programs and creating incentives to encourage states to adopt the best practices. It also recommends that NHTSA develop and disseminate to states best practices for DWI courts.

By taking these recommended comprehensive actions that have demonstrated their effectiveness, the United States can accelerate progress toward reaching zero alcohol-impaired driving crashes, injuries, and fatalities.

FINDINGS

1. Although impaired driving injuries, fatalities, and fatality rates in the United States have significantly decreased over the past several decades, the pace of these reductions has slowed since the mid-1990s; and alcohol-impaired driving continues to contribute to thousands of fatalities and tens of thousands of serious injuries each year.
2. The public generally believes that driving after drinking alcohol poses a significant threat to safety; however, many people continue to drive after drinking.
3. Blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels as low as 0.01 have been associated with driving-related performance impairment, and BAC levels as low as 0.05 have been associated with significantly increased risk of fatal crashes.
4. Blood alcohol concentration (BAC) levels higher than 0.05 are viewed by respected traffic safety and public health organizations around the world as posing unacceptable risk for driving, and more than 100 countries have already established per se BAC limits at or below 0.05. (See map below.)
5. Changing legal per se blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limits from 0.08 to 0.05 or lower would lead to meaningful reductions in crashes, injuries, and fatalities caused by alcohol-impaired driving.
6. High-visibility enforcement is an effective countermeasure to deter alcohol-impaired driving.
7. Passive alcohol sensors are an effective yet under-utilized technology for making an initial determination of the presence of alcohol during traffic stops or at sobriety checkpoints.

8. Administrative license suspension or revocation laws are an effective means of reducing alcohol-impaired traffic fatalities, and such laws could be strengthened by requiring that individuals arrested for driving while intoxicated (DWI) install an alcohol ignition interlock as a condition of license reinstatement.
9. States would increase the effectiveness of alcohol ignition interlock programs by employing those practices that have been shown to increase interlock compliance.
10. Driving while intoxicated (DWI) repeat offenders continue to pose an undue risk, and effective new approaches are needed to address the problem of DWI recidivism.
11. Driving while intoxicated (DWI) courts, with their emphasis on ensuring offender accountability and changing offender behaviors, represent a useful approach to rehabilitating drivers for whom traditional countermeasures are not effective.
12. A data-driven approach that incorporates specific, ambitious, and measureable goals, as well as continuous monitoring of the effectiveness of countermeasures, is a practical model for moving toward zero deaths from impaired driving.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of this safety report, the National Transportation Safety Board makes new recommendations to: the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and the 50 states, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia:

To the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration:

1. Seek legislative authority to award incentive grants for states to establish a per se blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit of 0.05 or lower for all drivers who are not already required to adhere to lower BAC limits. (H-13-XX)
2. Develop and disseminate to the states best practices for increasing alcohol ignition interlock installation and compliance that are based on recent National Highway Traffic Safety Administration research. (H-13-XX)
3. Create incentives for states to adopt the alcohol ignition interlock best practices developed in response to Safety Recommendation [2]. (H-13-XX)
4. Develop and disseminate to the states best practices for driving while intoxicated (DWI) courts. (H-13-XX)

To the 50 states, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia:

5. Establish a per se blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit of 0.05 or lower for all drivers who are not already required to adhere to lower BAC limits. (H-13-XX)

6. Include in your impaired driving prevention plan or highway safety plan provisions for conducting high-visibility enforcement of impaired driving laws using passive alcohol-sensing technology during law enforcement contacts, such as routine traffic stops, saturation patrols, sobriety checkpoints, and accident scene responses. (H-13-XX)
7. Include in your impaired driving prevention plan or highway safety plan elements to target repeat offenders and reduce driving while intoxicated (DWI) recidivism; such elements should include measures to improve compliance with alcohol ignition interlock requirements; the plan should also provide a mechanism for regularly assessing the success of these efforts. (H-13-XX) [*This recommendation supersedes Safety Recommendation H-00-26.*]
8. Take the following steps to move toward zero deaths from impaired driving: (1) set specific and measurable targets for reducing impaired driving fatalities and injuries, (2) list these targets in your impaired driving prevention plan or highway safety plan, and (3) provide a mechanism for regularly assessing the success of implemented countermeasures and determining whether the targets have been met. (H-13-XX)

To those states that have administrative license suspension or revocation laws:

9. Incorporate into your administrative license suspension or revocation laws a requirement that drivers arrested for driving while intoxicated (DWI) use an alcohol ignition interlock on their vehicle for a period of time before obtaining full license reinstatement. (H-13-XX)

To those states that do not have administrative license suspension or revocation laws:

10. Establish administrative license suspension or revocation laws that require drivers arrested for driving while intoxicated (DWI) to use an alcohol ignition interlock on their vehicle for a period of time before obtaining full license reinstatement. (H-13-XX)

Previously Issued Recommendations

To the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration:

Develop and disseminate to the 50 states, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia blood alcohol concentration (BAC) testing and reporting guidelines based on the 2012 report *State Blood Alcohol Concentration Testing and Reporting for Drivers Involved in Fatal Crashes: Current Practices, Results, and Strategies, 1997–2009*. (H-12-32)

Develop and disseminate to appropriate state officials a common standard of practice for drug toxicology testing, including (1) the circumstances under which tests should be conducted, (2) a minimum set of drugs for which to test, and (3) cutoff values for reporting the results. (H-12-33)

Work with the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety, Inc., to accelerate widespread implementation of Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety (DADSS) technology by (1) defining usability testing that will guide driver interface design and (2) implementing a communication program that will direct driver education and promote public acceptance. (H-12-43)

To the 45 states that have low reporting rates for BAC testing, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia:

Increase your collection, documentation, and reporting of blood alcohol concentration (BAC) test results by taking the following actions, as needed, to improve testing and reporting rates: (1) enact legislation, (2) issue regulations, and (3) improve procedures used by law enforcement agencies or testing facilities. (H-12-34)

Once the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has developed the blood alcohol concentration (BAC) testing and reporting guidelines recommended in Safety Recommendation H-12-32, incorporate the guidelines into a statewide action plan to achieve BAC reporting rates of at least 80 percent of fatally injured drivers and at least 60 percent of surviving drivers involved in fatal crashes. (H-12-35)

To the 50 states, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia:

Require law enforcement agencies to collect place of last drink (POLD) data as part of any arrest or accident investigation involving an alcohol-impaired driver. (H-12-36)

To the 33 states that do not mandate the use of alcohol ignition interlock devices for all DWI offenders, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia:

Enact laws to require the use of alcohol ignition interlock devices for all individuals convicted of driving while intoxicated (DWI) offenses. (H-12-45)

To the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the National Sheriffs' Association:

Inform your members of the value of collecting place of last drink (POLD) data as part of any arrest or accident investigation involving an alcohol-impaired driver. (H-12-37)

To the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety, Inc.:

Work with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to accelerate widespread implementation of Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety (DADSS) technology by (1) defining usability testing that will guide driver interface design and (2) implementing a communication program that will direct driver education and promote public acceptance. (H-12-48)

Previously Issued Recommendation Reclassified in This Report

As a result of this safety report, the National Transportation Safety Board reclassifies the following safety recommendation:

To the 50 states and the District of Columbia:

Establish a comprehensive program that is designed to reduce the incidence of alcohol-related crashes and fatalities caused by hard core drinking drivers and that includes elements such as those suggested in the National Transportation Safety Board's model program. (H-00-26)

Safety Recommendation H-00-26 is reclassified "Closed—Superseded" (superseded by Safety Recommendation #7).

BAC Limits World Wide

