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The Problem-Drinker Driver Project

Research
Note
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New York State Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse

Marguerite T. Saunders, Director

The Young Adult Heavy Drinker: Toward Profiling The Young Adult Problem Drinker Driver

John Yu, Project Research Scientist
William R. Williford, Ph.D., Project Co-Director

The leading cause of death for young adults in the 16-24 age group is alcohol-related accidents. The single most effective strategy to combat this serious public health problem has been passage of the 21 alcohol purchase age law. A study conducted by DAAA, one year following the passage of the purchase age law, reported that raising the legal purchase age from 19-21 reduced alcohol purchasing practices of 19-20 year olds by 56% and resulted in a 20-30% reduction in alcohol consumption, as well as other related behaviors such as intoxication and drinking and driving ("Impact of Minimum Alcohol Purchase Age Policy in New York State 1982-1986," prepared by Robert Lillis, December 1987).

Despite the effectiveness of the 21 alcohol purchase age legislation, young adults continue to be over-involved in alcohol-related problems including crashes. Thus, it is necessary to further study the 16-24 age group to determine if there is a particular segment of the population that remains at high-risk for over-involvement in alcohol-related crashes. This research note focuses on characterizing the young adult heavy drinker as the first step towards profiling the young adult problem drinker driver.

To identify the heavy drinker, we have established a drinking frequency-quantity index. This index indicates the average number of drinks consumed each day. The 1986 New York State Youth Alcohol Survey data were utilized to accomplish this study.¹

A pre-determined average of more than two drinks a day over a month was used to indicate heavy drinking.² People who consumed two drinks or less daily are considered "other" drinkers in this study. By using this criterion, we found that 3.4% (N=102) of the sample falls into the category of heavy drinkers. About half of the sample belongs to the "other" drinker category (N=1,572), and the remainder, never drank or abstained from drinking before the survey period. If a person drives and consumes on average more than two drinks a day, he or she is considered a likely heavy drinker driver. About 2.8% (N=86) of the sample meets the heavy drinker-driver selection criteria. "Other" drinker drivers are 44.9% (N=1,348) of the total sample. We compared the characteristics of heavy drinkers with other drinkers (see Table 1).

Young adult heavy drinkers drink three times more frequently in a month and consume four times more alcohol on a

drinking occasion than other drinkers. Heavy drinkers exceed other drinkers especially in the frequency and quantity of drinking beer and liquor. Further, heavy drinkers differ from other drinkers not only in drinking more frequently at home but also more frequently at other locations on weekend nights, which increases their chance of driving under the influence of alcohol (DUIA).

We further compared heavy drinkers' and other drinkers' weekday and weekend drinking and driving patterns. For other drinkers, more than half (56.6%) of their drinking in a month is done on weekend nights (Fridays and Saturdays), while weekend night drinking constitutes less than half (43.1%) of the total drinking in a month for heavy drinkers. Other drinkers tend to consume more alcohol when drinking on weekend nights than on weekdays, but the quantity of alcohol consumption of heavy drinkers is a constant whether drinking on weekends or weekdays.

Heavy drinkers drink twice as often as other drinkers on weekends and five times more frequently on weekdays. The data indicate that heavy drinkers have a high-risk for DUIA during both weekends and weekdays, because of the high frequency

of drinking; although other drinkers run a low risk of committing DUIA during a month, their chance of DUIA is the highest on weekends.

In examining the pattern of DUIA, we found that heavy drinkers are five times more likely to report being involved in DUIA than other drinkers. Heavy drinkers make up less than 3% of the sample but account for 25% of the total self-reported DUIA incidents.

In sum, compared to other drinkers, the excessive alcohol use of heavy drinkers is especially shown in the high frequency and quantity of drinking beer and liquor. A heavy drinker driver, compared to his or her counterpart, not only has a greater chance of DUIA on weekends but also during the week.

To characterize the young adult heavy drinker is an important step toward profiling the young adult problem drinker driver. This research effort describes the extent to which the young adult heavy drinker driver differs from other young adult drinker drivers in terms of drinking and driving behavior patterns. However, to identify the young adult problem drinker driver, we need to further explore his or her social, psychological, and health backgrounds.

Table 1
Comparison Between the Young Adult Heavy Drinker Drivers and Other Drinker Drivers

Drinking Behavior	Heavy Drinker (102) Mean	"Other" Drinker (1572) Mean	Significance
Frequency and Quantity			
Day/Month	19.0	5.3	*
Drinks/Occasion	6.4	1.6	*
Freq-Quant Index	3.7	.3	*
Types of Drinks			
Beer			
Day/Month	15.2	4.7	*
Drinks/Occasion	5.9	3.5	*
Liquor			
Day/Month	5.9	2.0	*
Drinks/Occasion	4.6	2.9	*
Wine			
Day/Month	1.7	1.1	*
Drinks/Occasion	3.2	2.1	*
Wine Cooler			
Day/Month	1.9	1.0	*
Drinks/Occasion	2.7	2.2	*
Weekend Night Drinking (of 8 weekend nights)			
Frequency	6.4	3.0	*
Drinks/Occasion	5.8	3.5	*
Freq-Quant Index	4.5	1.3	*
Weekend Night Drinking Location (of 8 weekend nights)			
Home	2.6	1.3	*
Friend's House	2.7	1.5	*
Bar or Club	3.5	1.8	*
Outside	.7	.4	*
Car	.7	.2	*
Driving Patterns	Heavy Drk Driver (86)	"Other" Drk Driver (1348)	Significance
Driving (Day/Month)	23.7	21.9	
Weekend Night Driving (of 8 weekend nights)	5.0	4.1	*
DUIA (Time/Month)	3.3	.6	*

* The T value for the difference of the means is at least significant at the .05 level.

All questions and requests regarding this research note should be directed to John Yu, Office of Criminal Justice Services, New York State Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse, 194 Washington Avenue, Albany, NY 12210; (518) 473-4386.

- 1 The Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse sponsored a series of statewide youth alcohol surveys from 1982 to 1986. The 1986 sample contains 3,000 randomly selected young adult New York State residents between 16-24 years of age. The method was a telephone survey.
- 2 This criterion has been widely accepted by researchers as an indicator for heavy drinking; e.g., the study on the 1984 Baton Rouge Survey of Drinking Among Youth and Young Adults (ADAMHA News on Alcohol, Drug Abuse, and Mental Health; October 1988, Vol. XIV, No. 10).