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Reducing Drunk and Impaired Teen Impaired Through Education

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ABSTRACT

Reducing impaired and drunk driving among teens is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because traffic accidents kill more, young Americans, ages 15 to 20, than any other single cause (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [NHTSA], 2006), and impaired and drunk driving contributes to many of those accidents. Currently, very little education is required to be given to persons in the area of impaired and intoxicated driving before they receive their driver's license. After a person receives the right to drive, no further education is required.

The position of the researcher is that teen drivers should be required to attend an extensive drunken/impaired driving awareness course before receiving a driver's license. The types of information used to support the researcher's position was information obtained from websites, government statistics, articles, and studies. The recommendation drawn from this position paper is that action must be taken to help prevent the needless loss of young lives from impaired and intoxicated driving. The best way to accomplish that task is through a multifaceted educational approach, which includes educating young drivers, their parents, and the community.

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INTRODUCTION

For most teens, the day they turn 16 years old is a long anticipated day. On that day, most teens are able to get their driver's license. The possibilities are endless. A driver's license brings with it a newfound freedom. A license to drive is one of the first steps towards adulthood. A driver's license and a vehicle bring a new measure of freedom that most 16 year olds have never experienced. Before they drive they go through what must feel like a great deal of training on different aspects of operating a motor vehicle. The one thing that most probably do not really consider is that there is a chance that they, or someone they know, will die in a car crash before they ever become an adult. Many times, the all too common reason for this is because a teen will make the choice to drive while intoxicated or otherwise impaired.

Drunk driving is the most frequently committed violent crime in the country, and, unfortunately, in Texas, 40% of fatal crashes are alcohol related (NHTSA, 2006). For the good of society, something must be done to work towards eliminating this problem. One way to work towards that goal would be to stop the problem before it ever starts. By doing a better job at educating young drivers on the problem of drunk and impaired driving, a major step could be taken towards reducing the problem.

Year after year, traffic accidents cause more deaths among young people ages 15 to 20 in the United States (NHTSA 2006). In the United States, in 2007, 3,174 of those drivers in the age group died in motor vehicle crashes, and 26% of those drivers were intoxicated ("Teen Drivers," n.d.). In Texas, in 2004, high school seniors were asked if they had driven a car after having several drinks at least once during the past year. Of those polled, 24% indicated that they had driven after having had several

drinks, representing eighty thousand impaired drivers on Texas roads annually (Mothers Against Drunk Driving [MADD], 2006). Of all the 15 to 20 year old drivers who were killed in motor vehicle crashes in 2005, 28% had been drinking (NHTSA, 2006). Education among young drivers is the key to curtailing the problem.

In a 2005 study of teenagers ages 12 to 17, approximately one in eight reported having participated in programs outside of school during the previous year (Students Against Destructive Behavior [SADD], 2007). SADD also found that of those who participated in those programs, the rate of use of alcohol during the month prior to being surveyed was lower, 14%, than when compared to those who had not participated in the programs, almost 17%. Education is effective and necessary. Young drivers must also understand that drinking any amount of alcohol before driving is unacceptable. Older drivers with blood alcohol levels that are not considered high are less likely to be involved in accidents than young drivers with the same blood alcohol levels ("Young Drivers & Alcohol", n.d.). A multifaceted community-based educational approach should be taken to reduce the occurrences of impaired and drunk driving among young drivers.

POSITION

Additional education is needed for teens before they begin to drive, and it should continue after they begin driving. A multifaceted approach should be taken to educate young drivers, their parents, and their friends to stop the problem before it starts. Programs such as "Shattered Dreams" or "Every 15 Minutes" programs could be very helpful at changing teens' attitudes towards drunk driving. The "Shattered Dreams" program is a program implemented in high schools. The program is a two-day event that begins with a very realistic mock crash, which involves an intoxicated teen driver as

well as other teens that die as a result of the crash. An audience of students watch as emergency workers work the scene, as well as when the bodies of those who died are removed. Later that day, a student is taken out of class every 15 minutes, as their obituaries are read over the intercom. Those students represent the loss of lives in the United States from drunk drivers every day. Those students pulled from class do not go home that night. Instead they are taken to a retreat, where they participate in several events, including writing their families a letter expressing their regret about their premature death. The second day generally includes a presentation to the student body. Those students taken from class the previous day read their letters to the rest of the student body. There is also a presentation from a community member who has lost a loved one to a drunk driver. The results of the “Shattered Dreams” program are very promising. A 2003 study found that of those students who participated in the program, 83% believed that their friends would be less likely to drive after drinking as a result of the program (Price, Salazar, Munoz, & Owen, 2003).

Another way to educate teen drivers before they begin to drive is through hands-on interactive education. There are many forms of such education, such as Fatal Vision goggles and the Simulated Intoxicated Driving Experience (SIDNE) DWI simulator. According to Fatal Vision, makers of Fatal Vision goggles and the SIDNE simulator, research showed that information delivered in an interactive hands-on approach is more likely to be retained compared to using a traditional lecture (http://www.fatalvision.com). Simulators have one advantage over any other training. Using a simulator allows a person to experience how their driving might be while intoxicated or impaired. This may

be an extremely effective method of opening the eyes of some young drivers before they ever have a chance to make that poor decision.

Parents must be educated and be involved. A recent random telephone survey in suburban Washington, D. C. found that while 65% of parents felt that teen drinking and driving is a problem, 32% of parents stated that they never talk to their children about drinking and driving (Beck, 1990). Parents must be informed. Study after study showed that kids, including teens, do listen to their parents (U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services, 2006). Parents need to be educated on the dangers of drunken and impaired driving. Parents that are armed with knowledge can use that knowledge to reduce the chance of their children driving while drunk or impaired.

Parents also must understand that according to one recent study, alcohol is not all there is to be concerned about when it comes to teens and driving. The Office of National Drug Control Policy (2007) stated, “Teens are just as likely to drive under the influence of marijuana” (p.1). Even though most in society would say that it is a parent’s responsibility to educate their children about things like drinking and driving, many parents, for one reason or another, choose not to. This problem must be addressed. Parents must be armed with the knowledge that their children will listen to them. Parents must know the facts about drinking and driving so that they can share them with their children. Almost all parents want what is best for their children, but, sadly, not all are armed with the knowledge that they need to do what is best for their children.

Education needs to be ongoing. According to one study of a high school based alcohol misuse prevention program, the program’s effect was found only during the first year after the program (Shope, Elliott, Raghunathan, & Waller, 2001). Knowing that the

effects of a program may only last one year, additional follow-up education must be required for young drivers to retain their driving privileges. The 55 minutes of alcohol related training that new drivers receive in drivers education in Texas (Texas Department of Public Safety, 2009) is simply not adequate, as proven by the fact that so many teen drivers are dying as a result of intoxicated or impaired driving. Currently, thousands and thousands of dollars are spent to send children to school and college for many years, so they can be productive adults. If some of that money could be spent to educate them in the dangers of drunk and impaired driving, more children could reach adulthood. When it comes to driving, beginners luck simply is not good enough for children.

COUNTER POSITION

There will always be those that say that extensive training on drunk and impaired driving would be too expensive, and the expense would place too much added burden on taxpayers and the families of driver's education students. It is true that programs such as "Shattered Dreams" can cost thousands of dollars to produce. According to the website for "Every 15 Minutes," a program very similar to "Shattered Dreams," the cost for the instructor's manual alone is $395.00. After adding all of the other supplies needed, the cost can go up thousands and thousands of dollars. The reality is that the expense of doing nothing is much more. In the year 2000 alone, the cost to the public in the United States was $114 billion and was due to alcohol related crashes. Of that $114 billion, the loss in quality of life was over $63 billion (MADD, 2009). Since teen drivers who drink and drive may very well become adult drivers who drink and drive, the real question becomes about why nothing is being done to stem the tide. If costs are a

road block, many communities' businesses and other organizations will gladly assist. When it comes to saving teens lives, it really is a community effort.

There are those who will say that the problem of teen drunk and impaired driving is not really all that bad; drunk and impaired driving deaths are already less than what they had been in the past. It is true that drunk driving among young people is declining, just as it is among the adult population ("Young Drivers & Alcohol," n.d.). However, "teens continue to be over-represented in alcohol related crashes" ("Young Drivers & Alcohol," n.d, para. 1). In 1996, although they represented only 14% of the population, people aged 16 to 24 were involved in 28% of all alcohol-related crashes ("Young Drivers & Alcohol," n.d.). Drinking, binge drinking, and drinking and driving among young people can be prevented. It is widely accepted that one of the first abilities of a human being to be affected by alcohol is judgment. Teens must learn the consequences of drunk and impaired driving before they make the choice to start drinking, so they can take action to avoid making the decision to drive after they have started to drink.

Some may feel that "kids are going to do what kids are going to do." In some aspects, that is true. As children make that transition from children to adults, they spend more time with friends and less time with parents (The Cleveland Clinic, n.d.). There is no doubt that young people are indeed heavily influenced by their friends. Societal norms have to change, and a change in overall attitude towards drunk driving is needed. If it becomes completely unacceptable to drink and drive, teens will be less likely to do so. The article, "Young Drivers & Alcohol" (n.d.) stated, "Social pressure among teens is a very effective way to reduce drunk and impaired driving" (p. 4). So, in

effect, by educating young drivers, they themselves could help further reduce the problem by making driving while drunk or impaired a socially unacceptable thing to do. It is known that peer pressure works. So, if “kids are going to do what kids are going to do,” let them make it a positive thing and have them make peer pressure a positive.

CONCLUSION

With many new drivers getting behind the wheel of a car every day, something has to be done to help them fully understand the responsibility that goes along with it. Education in a multifaceted approach is the key to reducing drunk and impaired driving in the United States. With motor vehicle crashes causing the deaths of more 15 to 20 year olds than any other single cause, the numbers are staggering. Of those teen drivers killed in crashes in 2007, 26% were intoxicated (“Teen Drivers,” n.d.). That number is simply not acceptable. Educational programs, such as “Shattered Dreams,” and simulators, should be expanded to include all teens. These programs have shown to be effective. The expense is more than justified. Parents need to be included in the education process. Even though it has been proven that parents have more influence on their teens than anyone else, some parents simply do not have the tools they need to educate their teens. For education programs to be the most effective, they need to be an ongoing process. Teens need to be constantly reminded of the consequences of driving while drunk or impaired.

Far too many teens are dying or being injured as a result of driving while drunk or impaired. Societal norms must be changed so that doing so is unacceptable to teens and their friends. It is known know that peer pressure is effective, and when driving

while drunk or impaired becomes an unacceptable behavior, teens will influence their friends not to do it. They just need to be educated to do so.

As a society, the expense of the programs must not be allowed to stand in the way. The expense of doing nothing more than is being done now is simply way too high. The loss of life is too much. Communities must work together to prevent this needless loss of life. The fact that young people are dying as a result of drunk or impaired driving is a community problem. It is very logical to believe that the community would rather share the expense of education than share the hurt of death.

Currently, traffic crashes take the lives of more young people than anything else, with a large percentage being alcohol related crashes. Everyone must understand that alcohol related crashes are 100% preventable. The law enforcement community would much rather help prevent this needless loss of life than to be the ones to inform a family that their child has died because those in a position to do so failed to educate them on the consequences of driving while drunk or impaired. Only after alcohol and impaired driving deaths have been eliminated as a cause of death among young people in this country can it be said that a good job has been done in education among teens about the problem.

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