



The Working Group

on DWI System Improvements

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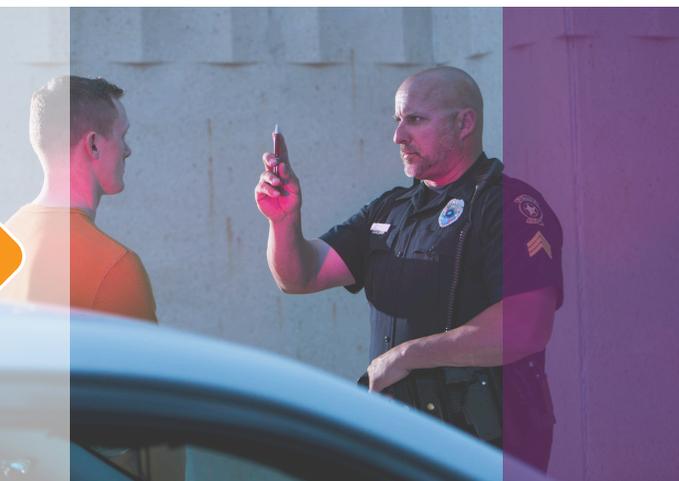
Understanding Impaired Driving & Priorities

The education resources of the Working Group on DWI System Improvements are produced by the **Traffic Injury Research Foundation** with funding from **Anheuser-Busch**. The Working Group on DWI System Improvements is a prestigious coalition of senior leaders of organisations representing frontline professionals in all segments of the criminal DWI system (law enforcement, prosecution, judiciary, supervision, and treatment).

Why is the enforcement of impaired driving laws a national and state priority?

- According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), alcohol-impaired driving fatalities involving a driver with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of .08 or greater accounted for 29% of total motor vehicle crash (MVC) fatalities in 2018, or 10,511 lives lost (National Center for Statistics and Analysis, 2019).
- Impaired driving is one of the most commonly committed crimes in the U.S. (Knoth and Ruback, 2019; FBI 2010; Dickson, Wasarhaley, and Webster, 2013).
- Driving while impaired (DWI) has been a priority road safety issue for decades, and it continues to receive significant attention nationally. To date, declines in alcohol-impaired road fatalities can be attributed to improved countermeasures (i.e., programs and policies) aimed at changing driving behavior with an emphasis on prevention and deterrence.
- Knowledge of the magnitude and characteristics of offenders is important to increase efficiency of detection and strengthen implementation of effective countermeasures.

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What are common myths associated with alcohol-impaired driving?

- **All impaired drivers are the same.** Impaired drivers are one of the most diverse offender populations in the justice system. The primary characteristic impaired drivers have in common is a tendency to drink and drive – some do it infrequently, others do it often; some are relatively low-risk of causing a collision, others are much higher-risk. Most impaired drivers are men. However, the number of female impaired drivers is increasing proportionately (Schwartz & Beltz 2018). These drivers represent different ages, levels of education and professional achievement as well as many different segments of the population. The socio-economic status and criminal history of DWI offenders varies greatly.
- **“I could have been arrested for impaired driving.”** Many people empathize with impaired drivers because they may have personally had occasion to drink and drive themselves. However, the average person rarely drinks enough alcohol to exceed the legal limit. Research has shown that most DWI offenders drink and drive numerous times (80-2,000 times) before they are caught (Fell, Tippetts, and Voas 2010; Nelson et al., 2015; Hansen, 2015; Osillia et al., 2017; Moller, Haustein, and Prato 2015).

Who drinks and drives and who is most at risk?

- **Drivers who drive after drinking 1 to 2 drinks.** Most people who drive after drinking do so rarely and when they do, they usually BACs below the illegal limit of .08. Roadside surveys show that about 80% of drinking drivers have BACs under the illegal limit of .08%. However, BACs of .03% are associated with about a two- to three-fold increase in crash risk; BACs of .05% have between six to 17 times increase in crash risk (TIRF, 2010).
- **First offenders.** First offenders represent an estimated 70% of the impaired driving problem (Perreault, 2013). However, once impaired drivers are arrested, research has shown about two-thirds of them are deterred by their experience with the criminal justice system and will not be apprehended again. However, approximately one-third will re-offend. A significant percentage of first offenders meet the criteria for a clinical diagnosis of substance dependence or having a substance abuse disorder, placing them at risk for re-offense. For those who have shown no signs of alcohol-related problems, the arrest experience along with an alcohol educational program is likely more effective (Traffic Injury Research Foundation, 2010; Voas and Fisher, 2001).
- **High-risk offenders.** An estimated 30% of DWI offenders become repeat offenders. These offenders drink and drive frequently (often with BACs at .15 or higher), have developed a history of prior convictions and often have some degree of a drinking problem. Their tendency to drink excessively puts them at especially high risk of causing a serious crash. Drivers with a BAC at .15 were about 150 times more likely to have a fatal crash than the average non-drinking driver. At BACs of .20 or higher this risk increased to approximately 460 times (Simpson et al. 1996).
- **Young drinking drivers.** This group of drivers accounts for a significant portion of the DWI problem. Their high risk is attributed to two factors. First, they are inexperienced drivers – for example, even when sober, those aged 16 to 19 years have a fatal crash rate more than four times higher than drivers aged 25-34 years, and nine times higher than drivers aged 45-54 years (Mayhew, 2007; Masten, Foss, & Marshall 2011; Conner & Smith 2017). Second, as inexperienced drinkers, they are more impaired at even low levels of alcohol.

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Of equal concern, they may also engage in binge drinking or excessive consumption of alcohol. In 2017, 22% of all fatally injured legally impaired drivers were between the ages of 16-24 (NHTSA





2018). However, roadside surveys had shown that young people were the least likely of any age group to drink and drive.

- **Female impaired drivers.** This population of impaired drivers is a growing concern. While males constitute a significant portion of the impaired driving problem, there is evidence of a growing number of DWI arrests among females, and incremental increases among female drivers testing positive for alcohol in fatal crashes in some jurisdictions in the U.S. This suggests women are an important part of the problem and warrant attention.

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contrast, male impaired-driving arrests have decreased by nearly half (Schwartz & Beltz 2018). More information on female impaired driving can be found on TIRF's website at: <https://tirf.ca/projects/study-female-impaired-driving-offenders/>

What are essential impaired driving priorities to ensure an effective and efficient DWI system for impaired drivers?

- Improve the ability of practitioners to put research into practice through the efficient and effective delivery of programs ranging from prevention to treatment.
- Develop new, evidence-informed initiatives to improve the DWI system.
- Improve the availability and quality of research.

What are priority research questions to be addressed?

Key research questions require answers to improve understanding of the scope of the DWI offender problem, particularly in relation to special sub-populations. Answers will support the development of effective and targeted intervention strategies and guide the application of these interventions in both urban and rural jurisdictions.

- **What are the pathways leading to DWI offenses?** To develop appropriate and effective prevention and intervention strategies, practitioners will benefit from information that guides effective identification, sanctioning, monitoring, and treating of DWI offenders early in the process to reduce repeat offending. Research should include better understanding of the individual characteristics and behaviors that are more likely to lead to drinking and driving, and commonalities among DWI offenders related to history, characteristics, or experiences.
- **What are effective strategies for dealing with impaired driving offenders?** Evaluation efforts should focus on a broad spectrum of interventions ranging from prevention and early intervention with a specific focus on high-risk individuals, to targeting persistent offenders. Existing impaired driving programs and policies should be evaluated for effectiveness to ensure funding is dedicated to those strategies producing the best outcomes.
- **Are there targeted interventions effectively addressing specific types of impaired driving offenders?** More research is needed to determine how best to reduce recidivism by specifically targeting the criminogenic needs and substance abuse and mental health issues of diverse categories of offenders.





- **How can the use of sex-specific/sensitive strategies be implemented with effectiveness?** To determine what types of approaches have had the greatest impact, research is needed to determine what interventions work best with each sex. This is needed because females' life experiences are different than males, and often they are less responsive or even shut down in response to traditional confrontational approaches.

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- **What are financially viable strategies for rural jurisdictions?** Rural areas tend to have higher levels of indigency, a lack of alternative sanctions or support services, and a lack of transportation options. It is critical that flexible strategies be explored and developed to enhance the ability of rural jurisdictions to implement necessary sanctions and programs and maximize the allocation of existing resources.
- **What are effective strategies for intervening with polysubstance abuse offenders?** Driving while impaired by drugs has become more prevalent. Research is needed to better understand the jurisdictional magnitude and characteristics of this problem, to identify ways to improve detection, and to develop appropriate interventions for dealing with this population of impaired drivers.

How can progress achieved in reducing impaired driving be sustained?

- Continue to develop strategies that increase an understanding of the problem through research, to monitor the problem and measure progress, and to implement, evaluate, enhance, and expand proven programs and policies. Consistent financial support of these strategies is important to achieving continued reductions in impaired driving crashes and fatalities.
- Do not become complacent about the issue after any achieved progress. Ongoing efforts are needed to strengthen the ability of governments to identify and track impaired drivers, to improve program implementation, to expand technological innovations, and to increase educational initiatives providing practitioners with the knowledge, skills and tools to apprehend, prosecute, and manage offenders.
- Continued vigilance can ensure offenders are consistently subject to these laws and programs with resulting progress for reductions in impaired driving.



What educational materials does The Working Group on DWI System Improvements provide?

The efforts of the Working Group on DWI System Improvements have served to identify critical system needs, to make needed educational materials available, to articulate the complex issues associated with program and policy implementation embedded within broader systems, and to give voice to the concerns of practitioners in the DWI system and identify achievable solutions. The Working Group provides educational primers, policy documents, and guides for DWI system professionals to help strengthen the efficiency and effectiveness of the DWI system.

Key topics discussed on this site include:

- Impaired drivers;
- Impaired driving programs and policies;
- Strategies to improve the DWI System;
- DWI Dashboard; and,
- other special topics.

Each of these topics contains a series of fact sheets structured in a question and answer format which are available for free download and sharing (with attribution). These resources are designed to support the training efforts for agencies that work within the DWI system.

To view more fact sheets, or to get more information about alcohol, its effects on driving skills, and impaired driving, visit dwiwg.tirf.ca.



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Traffic Injury Research Foundation

The mission of the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) is to reduce traffic-related deaths and injuries. TIRF is a national, independent, charitable road safety research institute. Since its inception in 1964, TIRF has become internationally recognized for its accomplishments in a wide range of subject areas related to identifying the causes of road crashes and developing programs and policies to address them effectively.

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