A Roadside Survey of Alcohol and Drug Use by Nighttime Drivers in British Columbia

Erin E. Beasley
Douglas J. Beirness
Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse

Following two decades of progress in reducing the magnitude of the alcohol-crash problem in Canada, safety advocates, policy makers, legislators, and enforcement agencies have begun to express greater concern about the use of drugs by drivers. Considerably less is known about drugs and driving than about alcohol and driving. To increase our knowledge and understanding of the extent of drug use by drivers, a roadside survey was conducted in British Columbia in June 2008. The primary objective of this survey was to collect samples of breath and oral fluid from drivers to assess the prevalence of alcohol and drug use. The survey involved selecting drivers randomly from the traffic flow between the hours of 9 pm and 3 am on Wednesday through Saturday nights in three cities (Vancouver, Saanich and Abbotsford). Overall, 90% of drivers provided a breath sample to measure alcohol use and 80% provided a sample of oral fluid to test for the presence of drugs. Results reveal the use of drugs among nighttime drivers to be as common as the use of alcohol. In total, 16.5% of drivers were found to be positive for either alcohol, drugs, or a combination of alcohol and drugs. The temporal pattern of drug use among drivers varied from that of alcohol use. Compared to alcohol surveys conducted in previous years, the overall prevalence of driving after drinking in British Columbia has decreased but the number of drivers with very high alcohol levels has increased. The data from the survey provide a baseline for an evaluation of the new drugs and driving legislation and will be of value to police, policy-makers and public health officials as they determine the most effective strategies to deal with the use of drugs by drivers.

Author Bios

Erin Beasley is a Research and Policy Analyst at the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. She received her Masters degree in Psychology from Carleton University. For the last several years, she has been working on the Drug Recognition Expert (DRE) Program for the RCMP and drug-impaired driving issues. She has extensive knowledge about the DRE program and impaired driving within Canada as well as internationally. She is the co-author of various papers relating to the accuracy and reliability of the DRE program.

Doug Beirness is a Senior Research and Policy Analyst and Advisor at the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. He received his Ph.D. in Psychology with a specialty in Addiction Studies from the University of Waterloo. He has extensive experience and expertise in alcohol and drug-impaired driving issues. His current research activities include roadside driver surveys, ignition interlock programs, and the assessment of signs and symptoms of drug use.