



# The Characteristics of Youth Passengers of Impaired Drivers

## The Issue

Motor vehicle collisions are the leading cause of death among Canadian youth.<sup>1,2</sup> The use of alcohol and other drugs is involved in a large proportion of these incidents. Of drivers aged 16 to 25 who died in a motor vehicle collision in 2010, nearly half (45.5%) tested positive for alcohol, often above the legal limit.<sup>3</sup> In a very similar population, drugs – most often cannabis – were involved in about one third (35.4%) of fatal cases.<sup>4</sup>

Young drivers who are killed in alcohol-related motor vehicle collisions are often transporting passengers who are of similar age to the drivers.<sup>5</sup> Passengers can contribute to dangerous situations by distracting a driver or by promoting risk-taking behaviours such as speeding, following other vehicles too closely or making illegal lane changes,<sup>6,7</sup> especially if the passengers have consumed alcohol or other drugs.

Although research has examined the characteristics of young drivers who have used alcohol and drugs, there is considerably less known about youth who ride as a passenger with an impaired driver. A greater understanding of the characteristics of young people who choose to travel in a motor vehicle with an impaired driver and the factors that influence their decision can contribute to the development of targeted prevention programs for this group.

## Key Findings

Provincial student drug use surveys reveal that within the last year approximately one third of students in grades 7 to 12 reported riding with a driver who had been drinking alcohol, often stating that the driver had drunk “too much.” Additionally, nearly as many students reported riding with a driver who had used cannabis, with half of all students in grade 12 reporting this behaviour.<sup>8</sup> Findings from the Canadian Alcohol and Drug Use Monitoring Survey reveal that individuals aged 15 to 24 were more likely to be the passenger of an individual who had consumed alcohol or other drugs, rather than to drive impaired themselves.<sup>9</sup> Encouragingly, the rates of students in the United States aged 16 to 18 riding with an alcohol-impaired driver have declined (23.7% in 2001 to 15.2% in 2011); however, rates of riding with a driver who has used cannabis have remained steady (21.7% in 2001 to 20.4% in 2011).<sup>10,11</sup>

Studies have shown that passengers of impaired drivers are often impaired to a level that is similar to that of the driver<sup>12,13</sup> or have a lower blood alcohol concentration (BAC), but still choose to ride with a driver who has consumed alcohol.<sup>5,14</sup> These outcomes suggest that neither drivers nor passengers make safe decisions about using vehicles after substance use.



## Risk and Protective Factors

Based on a review of a variety of types of studies, some common factors have been identified that increase the risk of riding with a driver who has used alcohol or drugs. These risk and protective factors for youth are listed below:

### Socio-demographic Risk Factors

- Being a youth (aged 9–15)
- Lower socioeconomic status
- Lower grades in school
- Not living with both parents
- Working part-time

### Psychosocial Risk Factors

- Risk-taking behaviour
- Sensation or novel experience seeking
- Impulsivity
- Aggressiveness
- Parental modelling and perceived approval
- Peer modelling and perceived approval

### Behavioural Risk Factors

- Heavy drinking behaviour
- Early age of drinking onset (prior to age 15)
- Drug Use
- Previous engagement in risky driving
- Truancy
- Cheating and stealing
- Driving or riding off-road vehicles after using alcohol or drugs

### Protective Factors

- Religiosity and involvement in religious activities
- Involvement in sports, academic and extracurricular activities
- Placing value on academic performance

Although many of the risk factors for riding with a driver who had used cannabis were similar to those for riding with a drinking driver,<sup>11,15</sup> there might also be a substance-specific effect. Individuals who use cannabis or drive after cannabis use were likely to ride with a cannabis impaired driver only; those who drive after drinking were likely to be a passenger of an alcohol impaired driver only.<sup>16</sup>

The effects of gender or the size of home community cannot be clearly stated, as the influences of these factors can change throughout adolescence and young adulthood. It might also be that certain youth are prone to engaging in all kinds of risky behaviours and riding with an impaired driver is just one example of this.<sup>17</sup>

## The Implications

Taken together, all these risk factors suggest that riding with an impaired driver might be the result of complex influences around personality, and parental and peer modelling. Youth who choose to ride with impaired drivers likely engage in other high-risk behaviours such as driving impaired.

- Prevention programs should engage youth who display high-risk behaviours.

Youth who ride with impaired drivers often start using drugs, including alcohol, before the age of 15. Education programs should be provided to youth long before the legal driving age so that they are well informed of risks before they encounter these dangerous situations.

- Youth substance use and safe transportation education should be provided before the age of 15.



Youth might believe that impaired driving is acceptable if they have seen their parents drive while impaired or if they ride off-road vehicles with someone who has consumed drugs or alcohol. Parents and peers play an important role through modelling safe behaviours that could prevent the normalization of riding as a passenger with an impaired driver.

- Prevention program should include messages for parents and family about modelling behaviour
- Users of off-road vehicles should be educated about safe practices and the consequences of substance use and driving.

Passengers can play a role in collisions by creating distractions or encouraging unsafe risk-taking.

- Driver education programs, public awareness and health promotion activities should promote the idea that safe transportation is the responsibility of both the driver and the passenger.

There is likely a collection of factors that could interact to increase an individuals' willingness to take risks in general and specifically to ride with an impaired driver. Furthermore, youth might not even perceive these actions to be of concern as other studies have reported that youth are confused about whether cannabis affects the ability to operate a motor vehicle.<sup>18</sup>

- Youth require clear information about the effects of drug use and its impairing effects on their ability to operate a vehicle and their ability to assess the safety of a driver.
- Youth should make plans for safe transportation ahead to avoid adverse consequences.

### Other Considerations

There are many factors influencing the decision to drive with a driver who has been using substances. It is important that youth plan ahead and have conversations regarding safe transportation. Consideration should go beyond choosing a designated driver and include an expectation of what being a designated driver means (e.g., no level of alcohol or drug consumption is safe) as well as the responsibilities of the passenger (e.g., not to distract the driver).

### Additional Resources

- What Canadian Youth Think about Cannabis
- Cross-Canada Report on Student Alcohol and Drug Use

<sup>1</sup> This report in short is based on the technical report, *The Characteristics of Youth Passengers of Impaired Drivers*, available on the CCSA website.

<sup>2</sup> Statistics Canada. (2012). *Leading Causes of Death in Canada, 2009*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada. Retrieved from [www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/84-215-x/2012001/int-eng.htm](http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/84-215-x/2012001/int-eng.htm).

<sup>3</sup> Traffic Injury Research Foundation. (2013). *The alcohol-crash problem in Canada: 2010*. CCMTA Road Safety Report Series. Ottawa: CCMTA.

<sup>4</sup> Beirness, D. J., Beasley, E. E., & Boase, P. (2013). *Drug use among fatally injured drivers in Canada*. In Proceedings of the 20th International Conference on Alcohol, Drugs and Traffic Safety. Brisbane: ICADTS.

<sup>5</sup> Isaac, N. E., Kennedy, B., & Graham, J. D. (1995). Who's in the car? Passengers as potential interveners in alcohol-involved fatal crashes. *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 27(2), 159–165.





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- <sup>13</sup> Romano, E., Kelley-Baker, T., & Lacey, J. (2012). Passengers of impaired drivers. *Journal of Safety Research*, 43(3), 163–170.
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- <sup>15</sup> Leadbeater, B.J., Foran, K., & Grove-White, A. (2008). How much can you drink before driving? The influence of riding with impaired adults and peers on the driving behaviors of urban and rural youth. *Addiction*, 103(4), 629–637.
- <sup>16</sup> Cartwright, J., & Asbridge, M. (2011). Passengers' decisions to ride with a driver under the influence of either alcohol or cannabis. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 72(1), 86–95.
- <sup>17</sup> Jessor, R., Donovan, J. E., & Costa, F. M. (1991). *Beyond adolescence: problem behavior theory and young adult development*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
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