



Report in Short – Drugs and Driving

Driving after taking drugs has recently come to the forefront as a public health and safety issue. But how much do we really know about drug use among drivers in Canada?

- Up to 30%—almost one third—of drivers killed in a crash have drugs in their systems, often together with alcohol.
- In surveys, 17% of Canadian drivers admit to driving within 2 hours of taking drugs that could impair their driving.
- Another survey found that almost 5% of drivers in Canada admitted to using marijuana within 2 hours before driving—and this number seems to be increasing.
- Over 20% of young drivers between the ages of 16 and 18 reported driving after using marijuana—slightly more than those who reported driving after drinking.

All of this shows that driving and drug use is a serious issue—and may be on the rise. But we really don't know that much about the use of drugs by drivers in Canada. How could we learn more?

The Approach: *A Roadside Survey*

To help determine just how big the problem of drugs and driving is, a random roadside survey was completed in British Columbia.

These types of surveys have been done in BC in the past, but only for alcohol. But now, with a relatively easy way to test for drug use—by collecting fluid from the mouth—the roadside survey can be used to measure both alcohol (with a breath sample) and drug use by drivers.

In the roadside survey, randomly selected vehicles were directed by a police officer to a parking lot where drivers were asked a series of questions by a survey crew member (not a police officer). Information was gathered about seatbelt use, the type of vehicle and the number of

people in the car. Drivers were asked to voluntarily provide a breath sample (to measure for alcohol) and a sample of oral fluid (to measure for recent drug use). Participation by drivers was voluntary and confidential.

Any driver found to have had too much to drink was provided a safe ride home, either by a passenger who could drive safely or by taxi.

The results of the drug testing on the oral fluids were not immediately available since they required analysis in a laboratory.

The oral fluid samples were tested for the following drugs:

- Cannabis (marijuana)
- Cocaine
- Opiates (such as codeine, heroine, morphine, etc.)
- Amphetamines (“uppers”)
- Methamphetamine (“speed”, crystal meth)
- Benzodiazepines (prescription drugs sometimes called tranquilizers)

The Key Findings: *Drugs and Driving*

- Drug use is as common as alcohol use among drivers.
- Of the almost 1,200 drivers who agreed to be tested, 10% tested positive for drugs.
- Nearly 90% of those who tested positive had taken only one drug but just over 12% had taken at least two different drugs.
- Marijuana was the most common at just over 40%, followed by cocaine at 29% and opiates at 15%.
- The most common combination of drugs was marijuana and cocaine.
- Male drivers were more likely to test positive for drugs.



- Marijuana and cocaine use were found in all age groups, but opiates and amphetamines use were mostly found in those over the age of 35.
- Most drivers testing positive for drugs (83%) had not consumed any alcohol.
- 17% of the drivers testing positive for drugs had been drinking and around half of those were over the legal limit for alcohol.
- Driving after drinking is most common late in the evening on weekends, but drivers who had used drugs were as likely to be found at any time of the night, whether on the weekend or not.

The Implications:

- Driving after using drugs is at least as common as drinking and driving but has not received nearly as much attention.
- Programs and policies to prevent driving after drinking need to be expanded to include drug-impaired driving; but the two issues may require different approaches.
- Young drivers appear to be heeding the warnings of the risks of driving after drinking, but not necessarily the risks associated with drugs and driving.
- The new laws on drug-impaired driving can help, but their enforcement must be supported.

What is Bill C-2?

Bill C-2 was enacted on July 2, 2008. For the first time it gives police the authority to demand drivers:

- submit to tests of impairment
- submit to an evaluation by an officer who is specially trained to recognize when someone has taken drugs and what drug (or drugs) they likely took
- provide a sample of blood, urine and/or fluid from the mouth (oral fluid) to see if they contain any drug

The new laws provide police with the tools necessary to detect and apprehend drug-impaired drivers and serve to level the field between alcohol- and drug-impaired driving.

More Information:

This summary is based on a full technical report entitled: *Alcohol and Drug Use Among Drivers: British Columbia Roadside Survey 2008* authored by Douglas J. Beirness and Erin E. Beasley. The full report is available on the CCSA website at:

http://www.ccsa.ca/Eng/Priorities/ImpairedDriving/BC_Roadside_Survey2008/Pages/default.aspx.

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About CCSA:

With a legislated mandate to reduce alcohol- and other drug-related harms, the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse provides leadership on national priorities, fosters knowledge-translation within the field, and creates sustainable partnerships that maximize collective efforts. CCSA receives funding support from Health Canada. The views expressed by CCSA do not necessarily reflect the views of Health Canada. Learn more at www.ccsa.ca



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