

Driving Drunk, Driving High: A Comparison of Student Attitudes Towards Driving while Drunk Versus Driving while High on Cannabis

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Keywords

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Abstract

This article reports on a comparison of high school students' attitudes towards driving under the influence of alcohol and driving under the influence of cannabis. Very few students, less than 5%, thought that it was acceptable to drink and drive. On the other hand, students were much more willing to endorse

Introduction

A recent U.S. survey of attitudes towards drinking and driving showed that, although most people are supportive of zero tolerance for drinking and driving, many people still drive after consuming alcohol. Almost 1/5th of the population reports driving a vehicle within two hours of drinking an alcoholic beverage. Younger adults are more likely to be drinker-drivers, and consume, on average, about 6 drinks prior to driving. These numbers have remained relatively stable over the past decade.

In Manitoba substantial effort has been invested in a public awareness campaign designed to educate people about the dangers of drinking and driving. This campaign seems to be working, especially with young people. Rates of drunk driving have been declining with young adults, programs in beverage rooms (e.g., free non-alcoholic drinks for designated drivers) have been implemented and there is a general perception that younger adults have a negative attitude towards drunk driving. One of the purposes of this research is to examine high school students' attitudes towards drunk driving to test this perception.

Furthermore, there has been very little systematic examination of the perceptions of adolescents with respect to driving under the influence of cannabis. Therefore an additional purpose of this research is to examine student's attitudes towards stoned driving.

Rates of alcohol and cannabis use

Alcohol is the most widely used drug by high school students. Depending on the year and the format of the survey, estimates suggest that about 25% of students are drinking at least weekly. Many of them are also old enough to drive and have access to cars. In terms of drug use, after a period of relative stability, cannabis use has been increasing in the past decade. In some provinces rates have almost doubled in the past ten years, with estimates of about 10% of youth using marijuana at least monthly. Many of the students who drink heavily are also using marijuana.

Effects of Marijuana on Driving

A common misperception about drug use and driving is that the effects of drugs, especially marijuana, are less powerful than the effects of alcohol. That is, because the effects are less physical and more cognitive, marijuana users think that they will be more able to hide their level of intoxication, and compensate for poor driving by driving slower. However, there is a substantial literature detailing the effects of marijuana on motor performance and on driving-related tasks. This literature can be summarized by suggesting that stoned drivers are more cautious, because they need to be to adjust for their lack of attention to important details (like signs). Although many of the potential consequences of driving while under the influence of cannabis are lessened by increased vigilance, cannabis is second only to alcohol in terms of its presence in motor vehicle accidents.

Method

The attitudes and behaviours described in this report were measured using a survey developed by the AFM and Proactive Information Services Inc. The data were collected in a manner that would allow us to make valid comparisons with the previous alcohol and drug use surveys. However, some questions were added to gather additional information on gambling and risk perception. As a result, some previously asked questions were omitted in order to keep the survey at a reasonable length. Questions were included that asked about the frequency of alcohol or marijuana use, and about attitudes towards drinking and driving.

Description of the Sample

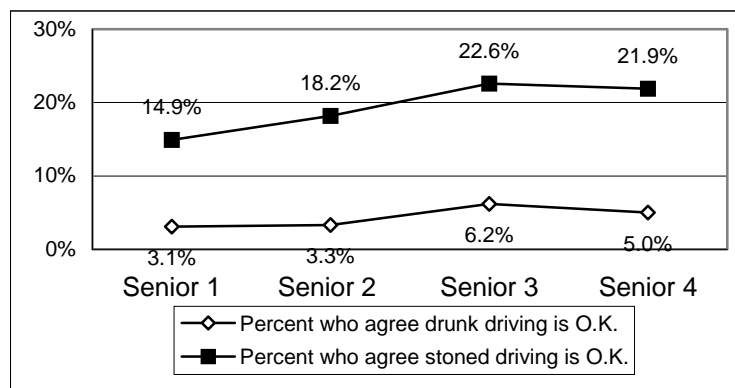
Thirty-two schools participated in the survey as a result of their involvement or interest in AFM programs. Altogether approximately 14,000 students attend these schools. From this total population, we randomly selected a sample of 4,680 students. Packages with instructions for principals and teachers, and the required numbers of questionnaires for each student were mailed to participating schools in April 2001. Of the 6,650 questionnaires that were sent, a total of 4,680 completed questionnaires were returned. This represents a response rate of 70.4%. The sample is 49.5% female, and 50.5% male. The average age is 16.7 years. The sample was stratified by grade to ensure equal representation of each grade level and age.

Results

Although about 80% of students had an alcoholic drink in the past year, less than 5% thought that drinking and driving was acceptable. This percentage has been declining, suggesting that public education about the dangers of drunk driving are reaching the younger age groups. On the other hand, there is a much higher level of tolerance from young people towards smoking marijuana and driving. Over 25% of male students and 13% of female students thought that it was at least “somewhat acceptable” to smoke marijuana and drive. Given the relative normalcy of this behavior (approximately 38% of the students in this survey had smoked marijuana at some time in the past year) it would appear to be important to educate students about the dangers of this attitude.

Figure 1 shows that the pattern of acceptance of driving while under the influence of alcohol or marijuana separately for each grade. Students in Senior 2 usually turn 16 years of age, the legal driving age in Manitoba. Students in the older grades (who are legally able to drive) are more accepting of driving stoned than the younger students, with over 20% stating that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement “There is nothing wrong with using cannabis and driving”.

Figure 1 Percent of students (by grade) who agree that driving drunk and driving stoned is O.K.



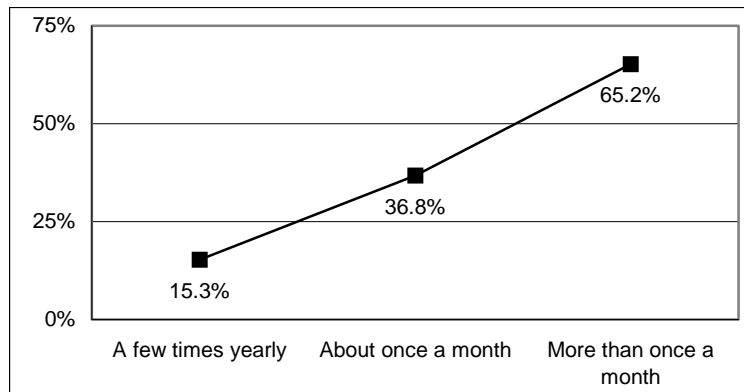
Overall, males were much more likely than females to think that it is all right to drive under the influence of either alcohol (7.5% vs. 1.3% of female students) or cannabis (25.7% vs. 12.6% of female students). This is consistent with previous findings on adolescent risk-taking and gender differences.

We also examined whether student’s personal substance use history with either illegal drugs or alcohol impacted on their perceptions of driving risk. Adolescents who were more likely to think that driving stoned or drunk is O.K. were more likely to be cigarette smokers. Oddly, kids who were current drinkers (i.e., had drunk in the past year) were just slightly more likely to think that it is O.K. to drink and drive ($p = .049$), but they were much more likely to think that it is O.K. to drive stoned. Similarly, adolescents who

had smoked marijuana in the past year were much more likely to think that it is O.K. to drive drunk or drive stoned.

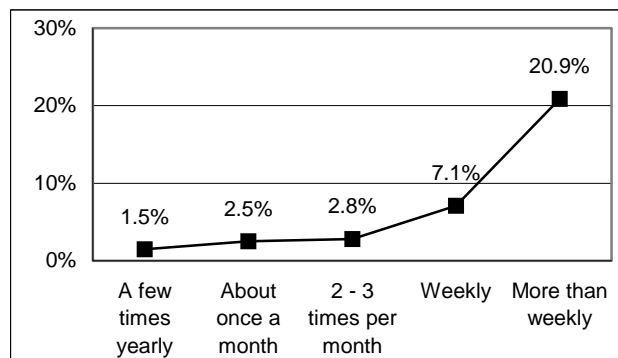
It also appears that heavier users of either cannabis or alcohol are much more likely to think that it is acceptable to drive under the influence of either substance. These data are shown on Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2 Percent of students and the frequency they smoke cannabis who agree than driving stoned is O.K.



This figure shows that about 15% of the students who use marijuana “a few times a year” (about 12% of the sample) agree or strongly agree with the statement “there is nothing wrong with using cannabis products and driving”. Over 65% of the students who use marijuana more than once a month (about 15% of the total sample), agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. Clearly, heavier users are more likely to find driving stoned acceptable.

Figure 3 Percent of students and the frequency they drink alcohol who agree than driving drunk is O.K.



Likewise, students who drink more heavily are more likely to agree or strongly agree with the statement “there’s nothing wrong with drinking and driving”. Very few of the

students who drink only occasionally (which is about 28% of the sample) thought that this is acceptable, whereas over 20% of the students who drink at least once a week (which is about 10% of the sample) agreed with this statement.

Discussion

Adolescents are much more accepting of smoking cannabis and driving than drinking and driving. Regardless of whether they drink or use cannabis, they are more likely to suggest that driving under the influence of marijuana is more acceptable than driving under the influence of alcohol. The difference likely reflects a couple of processes. First, primary prevention efforts, mostly aimed at the drinking driver, have been moderately successful. Coupled with increased enforcement and punishment the rates of drinking and driving charges to young people in Manitoba have decreased over the past few years. Nevertheless, this age group is still over-represented in terms of alcohol and driving offences. Second, we know from focus groups with adolescents that their acceptance of driving under the influence of cannabis is influenced by their perception that there is not a quick test (like a breathalyser) that can determine whether they are high on cannabis. Therefore, they mistakenly think that they cannot be charged with impaired driving. Unfortunately for the stoned driver who gets apprehended by the police, officers **are** able to arrest people for driving under the influence if they have reasonable suspicion. The field sobriety test provides evidence to support this suspicion. The breathalyser identifies the amount of alcohol that may be contributing to the suspicion, regardless; the behavioural signs of being stoned can also be used. In either case, a charge and a conviction for driving under the influence is a likely consequence.

A public education program needs to be implemented to help youth realize that they can be convicted of driving under the influence of marijuana. Some teenagers may be doing this under the mistaken perception that they are immune from prosecution. An education package about the dangers of driving (besides getting caught) also needs to be implemented. This is especially true since many of the heavier drug users also drink heavily, and the combination of alcohol and drugs may make them more vulnerable to the consequences of driving impaired. The main difficulty of implementing either of these programs will be reluctance on the part of funders to accept the policy position of harm reduction: that adolescents may experiment with using substances and combining this use with driving. Since the goal of good policy is to reduce the harmful consequences associated with such risky behavior funders must balance the immediate need for harm reduction with the erroneous perception that they are supporting use of marijuana.