



Report in Short

Alcohol and Drug Use Among Drivers: British Columbia Roadside Survey 2010

The Issue

Road safety is everyone's responsibility. The use of drugs and alcohol by drivers jeopardizes the safety of all road users. But how prevalent is the use of drugs and alcohol while driving? This is what we know:

- Population surveys reveal that 17% of Canadians admit to driving within two hours of using a drug that could impair their ability to drive safely.¹
- More than 20% of young drivers ages 16–18 report driving after using marijuana—slightly more than those who reported driving after drinking.²
- Approximately one-third of drivers killed in crashes have drugs in their system.³
- Alcohol is found in over 36% of drivers who die in vehicle crashes.³

These statistics make no mention of the thousands who are injured or are suffering the psychological impacts of losing a loved one in a substance-related crash.

In July 2008, the Criminal Code of Canada was amended to give police the authority to demand drivers to submit to tests to assess drug impairment. In the spring of 2010, the Government of British Columbia announced new sanctions for drinking drivers. CCSA's current roadside survey is the second such study it has conducted in B.C. to help determine the extent and characteristics of drug and alcohol use among drivers in selected communities throughout the province. The results of the survey will help evaluate the impact of countermeasure programs and policies like the ones above over time.

Key Findings

In 2010, a total of 2,840 vehicles were randomly selected in five B.C. communities—Vancouver, Saanich, Abbotsford, Prince George and Kelowna—and drivers were asked to participate in a voluntary and confidential roadside survey. Of the 2,840 drivers, 86% provided a breath sample to test for alcohol and 71% provided a sample of oral fluid to test for six

types of drugs. Information was also gathered about the driver, the vehicle type and the passengers.

Key findings include:

- As was found in a similar 2008 Roadside Survey, drug use among drivers is comparable to that of alcohol use (7.2% and 9.9% of drivers tested, respectively).
- While driving after drinking has decreased substantially since previous surveys, the number of drivers with blood alcohol concentrations (BACs) in excess of the Criminal Code limit (i.e., 80 mg/dL) has increased from 2.0% of drivers in 1995 to 2.7% in 2008.
- Alcohol use was most common among drivers aged 25–34 and 35–44; drug use was more evenly distributed across all age groups.
- Male drivers were more likely than females to test positive for drugs and alcohol, but high BACs among female drivers were as common as among males.
- Cannabis and cocaine were the drugs most frequently detected in drivers.
- Alcohol use among drivers was most common on weekends and during late-night hours; drug use was more evenly distributed across all survey nights and times.
- Of those drivers with alcohol levels greater than 80 mg/dL, 30% were coming from the home of a friend/relative, 22.5% from a bar/nightclub, 20% from a restaurant and 15.5% from their own home.

The Implications

Driving after using drugs is at least as common as driving after drinking but the two behaviours are very different issues. Drivers who tested positive for drugs span all age groups and are more often male than female. Drivers who have used drugs are found at similar rates across all survey times and days. In contrast, drivers who tested positive for alcohol were most likely to be males between 25–44 years old and were most likely to be found late at night and on weekends.

¹Beirness, D.J., Simpson, H.M., & Desmond, K. (2003). *Road Safety Monitor 2002. Drugs and driving*. Ottawa: Traffic Injury Research Foundation.

²Beirness, D.J., & Davis, C.G. (2006). *Driving under the influence of cannabis*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.

³Beasley, E.E., Beirness, D.J. & Porath-Waller A.J., (2011). *A comparison of drug- and alcohol-involved motor vehicle driver fatalities*. Ottawa: Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse.



The observed differences between drinking and driving and drugs and driving also suggest that programs and policies to prevent drug-impaired driving are likely to require different approaches. Male drivers and drivers between the ages of 25–44 who drink to levels surpassing the legal limit are a prime target for drinking-driving prevention efforts. In contrast, drugs and driving is more evenly distributed across all age groups. However, different substances should be targeted for specific ages. Given the different pattern of drug use by drivers, enforcement efforts should not be limited to late night hours on weekends, which is often the case for drinking-driving enforcement. The high proportion of drivers who were coming from the home of a friend/relative, or a bar/restaurant and who had high alcohol levels may highlight the value of involving peers, relatives and service industry staff in more robust prevention efforts.

The finding that drug use rivals alcohol use among drivers clearly highlights the need for a societal response to the use of drugs by drivers comparable to the efforts directed at drinking and driving in Canada over the past several decades. While enforcement is a key element in addressing the drug-driving issue, changing driver behaviour requires a comprehensive approach that also includes public education and further research.

More Information

This Report in Short is based on a full technical report entitled *Alcohol and Drug Use Among Drivers: British Columbia Roadside Survey 2010* by Douglas J. Beirness and Erin E. Beasley. The full report is available on the CCSA website at: www.ccsa.ca/2011%20CCSA%20Documents/2011_CCSA_Alcohol_and_Drug_Use_Among_Drivers_en.pdf.

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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 or the project sponsors. Learn more at www.ccsa.ca.

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