

Driving, Drinking, and Drug Use: Changing Patterns of Behavior in High School Seniors

The combination of drinking and driving has long been recognized as a dangerous problem behavior for high school and college students. Sarlin (2014) recently reported on an analysis of substance use rates and driving behavior based on data from the Monitoring the Future Study, a large national study of a representative sample of 8th, 10th, and 12th graders that is completed each year. This analysis is based on reports from about 22,000 high school seniors.

According to Sarlin, new trends are emerging in patterns of substance use and driving behavior and these parallel the overall changes in rates over time of marijuana and alcohol use in teens. In recent years, alcohol use has been declining in adolescents while marijuana use has been increasing. O'Malley and Johnston (2013) examined rates of substance use in teen drivers and found a shift showing that driving after using marijuana was reported more frequently than driving after using alcohol in 2011. For that year, 23.4% of high school seniors reported driving or riding in a vehicle with a driver after marijuana use; in the same year, 19.2% reported they had driven or ridden in a vehicle with a driver who had been drinking alcohol.

O'Malley and Johnston also examined consequences of driving while under the influence of these two substances and on factors predicting these behaviors. Responses from 2009-2011 were examined to compare tickets or warnings received and accidents that occurred in the past twelve months for drivers who reported either using marijuana or drinking heavily (5 drinks or more). As Sarlin points out, the drivers were not necessarily under the influence of either substance when these events occurred. Rates were fairly similar for tickets/warnings (42.1% for marijuana, 43.2% for alcohol) and for accidents (26.9% for marijuana, 30.2% for alcohol). These data suggest that, although little information is available on driving under the influence of marijuana, it is also related to problems with driving.

O'Malley and Johnston also reported that lifestyle factors were important in predicting the likelihood of driving under the influence of alcohol or marijuana. They found that having two parents present in the home, being female, having a strong religious commitment, and achieving a higher grade point average were protective factors or decreased the likelihood of driving after using these substances. On the other hand, factors suggesting lower parental supervision, such as truancy and more evenings spent out in recreational activities, predicted higher likelihood.

In summary, marijuana use has increased among teens in recent years and use of this substance is related to problem driving behavior in ways similar to alcohol. More efforts should be made to decrease the occurrence of these behaviors in adolescence. Sarlin states that a report NIDA recently requested recommends new efforts to improve laws and educational programs on driving under the influence of drugs.

References:

O'Malley, P.M. & Johnston, L.D. (2013). Driving after drug or alcohol use by U.S. high school seniors, 2001-2011. American Journal of Public Health, 103 (11), 2027-2034.

Sarlin, E. Among high school seniors, driving after marijuana use surpasses drunk driving. NIDA Notes, July 10, 2014. <http://www.drugabuse.gov/news-events/nida-notes/2014/07/among-high-school-seniors>

For further information regarding this article please contact Mary Ellen Lynch, Ph.D., at the Center for Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, 12 Executive Park Drive NE, Atlanta, Georgia, 30329. You can also phone us at 404-712-9815 or visit our website at <http://www.emory.edu/MSACD>

The Center for Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development is funded by the Georgia Department of Behavioral Health and Developmental Disabilities.