

Drinking and Driving

Back in your senior year of high school, odds are you can remember your parents telling you to be careful driving on New Year's Eve, out of concern for the high number of drunk-driving related accidents and fatalities that happen on this night.

However, most people don't know that there is one holiday that sees even more deaths related to drunk driving incidents – Thanksgiving.

Nationally, there are more alcohol-related deaths on the nation's highways over the Thanksgiving holiday than on any other weekend, including New Year's Eve and Day combined. And the time spanning the two holidays are the deadliest time of the year when it comes to drunk driving, with an average of 1,000 people killed over this period from alcohol-impaired car accidents each year.

But a particularly sobering statistic involves New Jerseyans of college-age: between 1997 and 2007, the number of youths under 21 killed in alcohol-impaired driving accidents decreased in all but 13 states – seemingly good news, until you find out that one of those 13 exceptions was New Jersey. So, despite a trend nationally over the last decade to fewer alcohol-related driving deaths among young people, our state saw a nearly 12 percent rise in the number of such deaths over this period. The fact remains that motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for those 20 years old and younger, and in such fatal crashes, a third of the drivers killed had also been drinking.

Since the 1970s, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has conducted a nationwide study once each decade to estimate the prevalence of drunk driving on the nation's roads. Fortunately, on a national level, things have been trending in the right direction since then: in 1973, an astonishing 7.5% of all drivers on the road were driving drunk at any given time, but by 2007, that percentage had dropped to 2.2% of all those behind the wheel driving while intoxicated.

But the problem remains serious - especially in the late night hours. In 2007 over two percent of weekend night-time drivers had blood alcohol concentrations (BAC) above the legal limit (greater than 0.08g/dL), compared to only 0.1% of daytime drivers. However, as you might expect, things get a lot worse the later at night you go: the percentage of drivers on the road who are driving drunk increases to nearly five percent of all drivers after 1 a.m. on a typical Friday night. And the age group that is most likely to have a BAC levels above the legal limit? Ages 21-24. (2) (1)

The potential penalties are severe: blowing a 0.08 BAC on a first offense can result in the loss of your driving privileges for three months, fines of \$2,000 or

more when all costs are considered, and even incarceration for up to 30 days. However, blowing a 0.10 BAC on the first offense can result in the loss of your driver's license for up to one year. On the second offense, that time goes up to two years, and on the third offense: 10 years with no driver's license. Just try getting around New Jersey not being allowed to drive for the next decade.

So, this holiday break, eat, drink, and enjoy your time spent with family and friends. But if you are of legal age to drink beverages of the alcoholic variety, please also do so with a double-fistful of responsibility and common sense. It could just save your life.