



Drug-Impaired Driving Data Collection

Background

Understanding the role of drugs other than alcohol in traffic crashes remains challenging due to significant data gaps. Collecting and analyzing blood samples from seriously injured or fatally injured drivers can be costly and logistically difficult. Even when drug testing is conducted, the data collected is often inconsistent or incomplete, limiting its usefulness. To truly understand and address drug-impaired driving (DUID), states need more comprehensive, high-quality data.

The Challenge: Disconnected and Unreliable Data

Current data systems fail to provide a coherent picture of the drug-impaired driving crisis due to several structural deficiencies:

1. **Lack of Linkage Between Data Systems:** State data is typically held in three separate silos (Police Crash Records, Forensic Lab Toxicology Reports, and Court Adjudication/Conviction Records) that rarely communicate effectively. Without a seamless electronic linkage, it is impossible to determine if a driver involved in a fatal crash who tested positive for drugs was actually convicted of DUID.
2. **Inconsistent Testing and Reporting:** Data quality varies widely by jurisdiction. Many forensic labs practice “**stop-limit testing**,” where they cease testing for drugs once a driver is found to be over the legal limit for alcohol. This practice results in the massive **underreporting of polysubstance impairment** (alcohol and other drugs). Furthermore, the specific drug panels tested differ by state, making it impossible to compare DUID trends nationally.²⁹
3. **Inadequacy of Federal Reporting Systems:** The Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS)—the national census of fatal crashes—has historical limitations, particularly in drug reporting. While it records the presence of a drug, it does not include an estimate of **impairment level** or sufficient detail to capture all instances of drug use, hindering accurate research and risk assessment.

The Impact of Fragmented Data

These data system deficiencies create profound problems for public safety efforts:

- **Ineffective Countermeasure Development:** Policymakers cannot pass effective per se or impairment laws, nor can law enforcement prioritize training for emerging drug threats (e.g., synthetic opioids), if they lack accurate data on the specific drugs causing crashes.
- **Misallocation of Resources:** State highway safety offices cannot allocate limited funds effectively if they don’t know the true scope and nature of the DUID problem in their jurisdiction.
- **Compromised Research and Public Awareness:** The lack of reliable, standardized data prevents researchers from establishing a clear, causal link between drug concentrations (e.g., THC nanograms/mL) and actual driving impairment, which undermines efforts to set legally defensible impairment thresholds and develop targeted public awareness campaigns.

Policy Recommendation

To effectively combat drug-impaired driving, immediate action is required to fix the structural flaws in data collection and reporting systems. The 2018 report, *Enhancing Drugged Driving Data: State-Level Recommendations* by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, identified seven recommendations for improving drugged-driving data collection aimed at current laws and policies:

1. **Implied Consent Laws:** Should extend to drugs and support the collection of blood and/or oral fluid for drug testing. The laws should include the collection of a specimen or specimens for multiple tests. Suspects should not be permitted to choose the type of test(s).
2. **Collection and Testing of Specimens for Drugs:** Law enforcement officers (LEOs) should be authorized and encouraged to collect and test specimens for drugs on all Driving Under the Influence/Driving Under the Influence of Drugs (DUI/DUID) arrestees, with probable cause and a warrant for a blood test.
3. **Drug Testing and Reporting for Surviving Drivers:** Drug testing should be authorized and encouraged for all surviving drivers in fatal and serious injury crashes (and the results reported) when there is probable cause that impairment was a factor.
4. **Drug Testing and Reporting for All Fatally Injured Drivers:** Enact laws and/or implement policies mandating drug testing and reporting of the test results for all fatally injured drivers.
5. **Distinguish Among Impaired Driving Offenses in Data:** Update data collection and reporting systems to distinguish among impaired-driving offenses (DUI, DUID, and both) in all relevant data, particularly citation data.
6. **Penalty for DUID Test Refusal:** At a minimum, the penalty for a refusal to provide a specimen for drug testing should be at least as severe as for a first DUID offense.

Relevant Research

For more resources and tools visit newsroom.aaa.com/impaireddriving.

