

Toxicology Labs

Background

Drug-impaired driving is rising across the country, but the forensic toxicology laboratories needed to detect and prosecute these offenses are struggling to keep up. Chronic backlogs and limited resources mean delayed results, dismissed cases, and missed opportunities to hold impaired drivers accountable.

Without timely toxicology support, even the best enforcement strategies fall short. Sustained investment in laboratory capacity, modern instrumentation, and specialized personnel is essential to ensure drug-impaired driving cases can be fully investigated and prosecuted—and to make our roads safer for everyone.



The Current Challenge: Capacity Gaps and Case Backlogs

Research and national assessments consistently show that toxicology labs are **under-resourced relative to rising demand and often miss the opportunity to identify drug-impaired drivers:**

- In 2019, the National Institute of Justice reported that state and local forensic laboratories were understaffed by more than 900 positions and those shortfalls resulted in growing backlogs as turnaround times increased.³¹
- Researchers from the Center for Forensic Science Research and Education examined blood samples from over 2,500 suspected driving under the influence of drugs (DUID) cases in which only alcohol was initially identified. The study found that cases with blood alcohol content (BAC) of 0.10 were also positive for other drugs 17.3% of the time. These results spotlight the issue of **stop limit testing**, where further lab testing is cut off after evidence of BAC that meets or exceeds a pre-determined threshold (typically 0.08 or 0.10), which can miss many drug-positive cases.³²
- Reporting on BAC levels for persons involved in fatal crashes varies from state to state, with testing rates decreasing from 2012 to 2021.³³

Policy Recommendation

To improve impaired-driving enforcement and public safety, policymakers should consider the following actions:

1. **Expand Laboratory Capacity:**
 - a. Increase funding for state and local forensic labs to reduce case backlogs.
 - b. Support regional lab networks to share capacity across jurisdictions.
2. **Invest in Workforce Development:**
 - a. Fund training programs to address toxicologist shortages.
 - b. Support cross-training for law enforcement and prosecutors on interpreting toxicology results, and for toxicologists on how to testify successfully in court.
3. **Modernize Technology and Equipment:**
 - a. Upgrade instruments and implement high-throughput automation.
 - b. Adopt electronic evidence management systems to streamline workflows.

Relevant Research

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

