College Students and DUI: Justifications for Driving Under the Influence

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Abstract

In-depth interviews were conducted in 2023 using 9 college students at a small, private university located within the southeastern area in the United States. The primary goal of our study was to identify the reasoning for students to drive after drinking despite the possible repercussions such as license suspension, arrest, or obtaining a criminal record. We discovered that these students labeled drunk driving as nothing special but rather something they considered convenient for them. Specifically, these students justified their drug use through the use of four recurring subdued DUI arguments: 1) knowing when not to get behind the wheel 2) being the "logical" option, 3) avoiding unnecessary expenses and, 4) distance arguments. We discuss limitations to the study and conclude by suggesting three strategies for prevention that would directly target these four arguments. This includes emphasizing self-protection, suggesting to split costs, and encourage students to not just be another statistic.

Keywords DUI; driving after drinking; fatalities; college students

College Students and DUI: Justifications for Driving Under the Influence Literature study

Driving under the influence, also known as DUI, is an epidemic in the United States. Starting off as just driving under the influence of alcohol and measuring blood alcohol content (BAC), DUI has now been recognized as driving under the influence of any mind-altering substance (Rivelli, 2022). Alcohol, however, is a major issue when it comes to getting behind the wheel as people tend to get a confidence boost after drinking — convincing themselves that they are okay to drive (FKM&A Attorneys at Law, n.d.). Although there is a legal limit of 0.08% BAC, research suggests that people may be below that number, yet they are still impaired: "Research from many sources has shown that driving performance is impaired at even lower concentrations" (Andrews et al., 2021, p. 2). Research also suggest that cutting the legal BAC level for driving to 50 mg/dL could save up to 800 lives per year in just the United States (Andrews et al., 2021). This would be just one of the many measures that should be taken in order to combat drunk driving.

In the United States, drunk driving accounts for a vast amount of car crash fatalities. In just 2017, 32% of fatal car crashes at night were DUI's (Andrews et al., 2021). Fortunately, the numbers are slowly beginning to decrease thanks to innovative ideas such as ride-sharing. For example, 41% of traffic fatalities were owed to alcohol in 1985 whereas that number has decreased to 30% in 2020 (Insurance Information Institute, n.d.). This can be partially owed to the fact that ride-sharing programs were not as easily accessible and people did not necessarily want to pay after a night of drinking. The National Bureau of Economic Research suggests that ride-sharing applications such as Uber and Lyft have reduced traffic fatalities due to alcohol by 6.1% as well as reducing traffic deaths overall by 4% (Anderson & Davis, 2021, p. 1). Although

people have equal access to these applications, it makes it difficult to understand why there are still people that choose not to use ride-sharing. While taxis are still in use today, they are not as relevant compared to other applications like Uber and Lyft for the fact that they charge more and are harder to obtain (Goetz, 2022). Driving under the influence is now labeled as more taboo than it was back then as society has thoroughly assessed the risks of drunk driving and does not aim to consider it as something inevitable. This negative association with DUI is due to the fact that we have enacted stricter laws for drinking and driving that are mostly catered towards minors like the Zero Tolerance laws that prevent a minor from having any level of alcohol in their blood while driving (Hunter, 2019). Although these laws help to subdue the statistics of DUI, minors are still at risk.

Unfortunately, over a quarter of traffic-related incidents and fatalities are owed to drunk driving (NHTSA, 2020). The statistics are even more daunting when looking at it from an everyday perspective. Cars are driven towards to work, a friend's house, a doctor's appointment etc.,. When we take a look at the casualties that occur every day in the United States, we are able to put into perspective of just how daunting the numbers are: "about 32 people in the United States die in drunk-driving crashes — that's one person every 45 minutes. In 2020, 11654 people died in alcohol-impaired driving traffic deaths — a 14% increase from 2019" (NHTSA, 2018, para. 1). Although penalties are increasing and there are more alternatives to drunk driving today, the numbers of fatalities are still going up. There is certainly a preference for some people when it comes to deciding whether or not to leave their car or take the risk which is seen through the statistics.

When it comes to driving under the influence, it is important to consider the demographic that is most at fault. The reality is that young people between the ages of 21 to 24 years old are

most at-risk for drunk driving (Rivelli, 2022, para. 6). These are people who are in college or have just recently graduated. What is even more shocking is that more than 25% of college students have driven after drinking (Usdan et al, 2002). A study conducted of 110 undergraduate students in the United States revealed that 21% reported driving after drinking 2 or more drinks of alcohol within the past 30 days alone (Lewis et al., 2012). This is not surprising as this age group are the ones that value social life the most, and peer pressure play a bigs role during this age when it comes to deviant behaviors such as DUI. In fact, fatality rates are highest for 21-24 year-olds when it comes to drinking and driving (NHTSA, 2018). This can be owed to their inexperience with alcohol as well as limited driving experience that already puts them at the top of the list for car accidents in general (Usdan et al., 2002). In similar correspondence with other serious crimes, men between the ages of 21-24 lead the gender category for drunk driving fatalities, accounting for 81% of related arrests (FBI, 2019).

Although it is very difficult to argue the fact that there should be no valid reason for the relationship between drinking and driving under the influence, there must be a reason why it happens so much on a daily basis. The associated consequences of drinking and driving are commonly neglected in the moment, and it only takes one wrong move to risk the lives of not only the driver themselves, but those around them too. What is even more daunting is that it does not just happen in the United States; driving under the influence has reached the level of a global epidemic. A 2014 study in Denmark attempts to find the answer to why it happens so frequently, even though people are taught from a young age that it is wrong. From a social deviance point of view, research suggests that drunk driving is an individual moral problem (Fynbo, 2014). In this case, participants had been suffering from alcoholism which means that driving to the store in the middle of the day consisted of drunk driving. The interviewees said they considered drinking as

"social" which suggests that finding a way to a friends house and back or drinking buddies at work turns into driving oneself, even after a few drinks (Fynbo, 2014). On the other hand are the people who are far less deviant and are considered regular everyday civilians; these are the types of people who drive after family functions of dinners and do not consider themselves heavily intoxicated (Fynbo, 2014). It is not difficult to assume that the term "driving under the influence" may infer someone who is labeled as properly drunk behind the wheel. However, this fails to consider those who just have a glass or two of wine with dinner and decide to drive. The group that is most at-risk are, in fact, not those who just have one drink, but rather those who tend to drink a lot in a short period of time.

Alcohol may give drivers the confidence to get behind the wheel even when they should not. A study was conducted of fifty adults between the ages of 21 and 34 that consisted of half DUI offenders and half non-DUI offenders (Van Dyke et al., 2014). This time, measuring the differences between impulsivity and willingness to drive of both parties. The study revealed that the reason for people to drive under the influence was owed to the fact that they would conduct self-evaluations to determine "driving fitness and perceived intoxication" (Van Dyke et al., 2014, p. 25). Impulsivity was noted as something that differentiated DUI offenders from their controls in the sense that they would overestimate their ability to drive; however, the study raised a point that is worth noting and that is the population that is most at-risk are binge drinkers (Van Dyke et al., 2014). Shockingly enough, college students are the most at-risk population for binge drinking and research shows that 50% of college students that drink are binge drinkers (Alcohol Rehab Guide, 2022). These at-risk populations make it easier to filter out the reasonings behind deviant behavior because the findings are more likely to be similar in regards to an issue such as drinking

and driving. With that said, is it possible that college students are not able to perceive their intoxication levels before getting behind the wheel compared to older adults?

Our team's motivation for this study surrounds the idea of spreading awareness about the consequences of drunk driving. It is one thing to know that the statistics show that college students are the most at risk of DUI's, but it is another to know that the people we hold dearest to us are part of the percentage. It is not in our expertise to advocate against drunk driving, however the results from both the literature studies and our interviews are enough to demonstrate the dangers of DUI. It only takes one time to forget your limit and take a risk; life should never be on the line. This paper aims at answering the question: what encourages students to drive after drinking alcohol despite the risks associated including license suspension, arrest, or even a criminal record?

Methods

Our team's method consisted of in-depth interviews that took place in person or over the phone of 9 participants that are currently enrolled in college in the southeastern part of Florida. The age of the participants ranged from 21 to 26 and included both males and females. Participants were asked questions like "tell me about the most reckless time that you drove under the influence of alcohol", "explain how you felt when you got out of the car after", and "at what point would you not get behind the wheel?" in order to understand and compare the justifications for driving after drinking. Our team made an effort to stay on topic if any other questions arose in order to not have any skewed data.

The recruitment method we used was rather simple; members from our team knew of at least two to three willing participants who have driven after drinking during their time in college. We made sure to exclude people who do not drive, people who do not drink, those who are

heavily medicated, and people who are under the legal drinking age. Fortunately, all original participants met these requirements and were included in the study.

Category	Number
Gender	
M	6
F	3
Age	
21-23	7
24-26	2
In college	;
Yes	8
No	1

We ensured to distribute a written consent form that indicated the risks of the study and thoroughly described the steps we would take to interview them. The form contained a list of risks including physical, psychological, social, and legal. There were no real physical risks to participating in our study as it only consisted of a short interview. Psychologically, participants may have feelings of regret or shame when admitting to driving under the influence. The social risks include being judged by others if people were to find out that they had driven drunk or potentially lose friends or family who are against DUI. The legal risks of participating in the study are if the individual is on probation, then they may be faced with more legal trouble. Lastly, the economic risks someone could face is if they borrow family or friends cars, and they will not let them use it anymore due to finding out about their deviant behavior. This may force the individual to have to pay for Ubers or to buy their own car.

We achieved confidentiality in our study by using fake names and if the interview is documented through a voice recording, we made sure not to use the interviewee's name. We also made sure to inform participants beforehand of the risks mentioned above and summarized the study in order for them to know exactly what they are getting into. Our team did not share the participant's personal information with anyone else, not even amongst each other, and will

destroy the data once our study is fully concluded. Lastly, we did not share our laptops or iPads in order to minimize the risk of leaked information.

The problems we encountered mostly stemmed from the recruitment method because our team was not able to find more participants that we knew who drive after drinking. This left us with only 9 participants that fortunately provided us with adequate information that we were able to identify patterns and discrepancies. Some participants were hesitant to answer questions but after realizing that their information would not be disclosed, they felt more comfortable. Having more participants would certainly help further confirm our findings.

Results

As a result of our research, four separate themes were present amongst those who have driven after drinking. The most common that came up were that people felt that when they got behind the wheel after drinking, they were not being a threat to society, which therefore justified their decision. This came hand in hand with people claiming they "just know" when not to get behind the wheel. Some participants even mentioned that there were no physical side effects and that it was not as big of a deal as it is made out to be. The interviews also revealed that food and pricing was a common reason for people to drive after drinking. These responses were separated into two different patterns as distance and expenses was something that came up frequently.

Knowing when not to get behind the wheel

After asking the question "at what point would you not get behind the wheel after drinking?", most people claimed that they would know when they should not drive. Participants even used BAC as a reference although they had never been accurately measured by law enforcement. One participant even mentioned: "I always know when I'm past my limit to drive after drinking...I just know when I would blow past the legal limit". It was interesting to hear

that, even though this individual had never blown into a breathalyzer, it is something that travels through their conscience when they choose to drive after a night of drinking. Two of our female participants claimed that they know when to not get behind the wheel due to visual impairments: "It's usually when I can't see straight... That's when I know that I probably won't do a good job", "When my vision or movement is impaired. If my actions feel delayed I don't drive".

Our results revealed that people did not really feel as if they were a big societal threat when they drove after drinking. Most participants emphasized the fact that their decision was made consciously and that everyone has their own personal indicators that tell them when it is not a good idea to drive. This may be owed to the fact that people felt a sense of shame or guilt once they recapped the most recent or dangerous time that they drove after drinking which led them to respond in such a way that downplayed there response.

Being the "logical" option

Another pattern that was observed is the idea that some people felt when they are under the influence, that their driving skills are better than when they are sober. The interviewees expressed that they feel that when driving under the influence, they do so with a greater skill. This can be owed to the fact that alcohol tends to give people a boost of confidence, convincing them that they are doing a better job when, in reality, that may not be the case. Some participants felt that there was really no physical side effects and that they were doing it for the right reasons. This became the new justification for being the "logical" option. They just did not feel the need to use any other mode of transportation and trusted in their abilities — along with those who rode in the car with them for that matter.

One of the more veteran deviant participants mentioned: "Also, I have thought about it many times and I do not have to worry because I drive better when drunk than when I am sober.

The people who get into my car have told me about it several times". Not only did the driver themselves feel they were doing a good job, but the passengers as well. It is difficult to know whether this is an accurate claim, assuming the people in the car had also been drinking and their judgment may be distorted. However, this sense of confidence was not just the case for this individual: "For some reason I feel more confident when I am driving drunk because I know I am being extra careful" a female participant noted. Not to mention that one participant did not question their abilities one bit when they reported their experience of getting behind the wheel after drinking: "I think that driving under the influence is not an issue because I have my driving skills at one hundred percent. It [driving under the influence] seems to be irresponsible but I have tried it and I manage to drive better when I drink... it's just the way it is".

The idea of driving after drinking an amount that would constitute as a DUI if an individual were to get pulled over does not have any logical justification. Our study is limited to those findings because we are not able to know what average BAC levels the participants would be at when driving. With that said, we are left with verbal confirmation that most times when people would drive after drinking, they would consider themselves drunk. There is no possibility for someone who has been drinking to have their driving skills at "one hundred percent". This goes back to the idea of getting a confidence boost after getting behind the wheel.

Distance

The distance of a trip seemed to be a deciding factor for some participants. However, most recorded trips mentioned in the interviews included those that were intended to get food after a night of drinking. In the same way, participants would only do it when they really had to. One participant made it clear that driving after drinking only happens under certain conditions, and it almost always entails going to get food: "It's way more expensive to order it than to just

drive there... We [friends] usually see who's the most fit to drive and then we try to find the closest open fast-food restaurant". While it may still be ethically wrong, this interviewee's attempt of safely getting food after a night of drinking meant evaluating their friend group to see who can get them their the safest. Another participant provided conflicting responses that stated the campus cafeteria food, although being the closest option, did not suffice: "The food on campus is even worse than usual during later hours of the day. The cheeseburgers look like plastic and taste awful. I do not have a lot of money since my parents support me throughout college so I cannot afford to order UberEats whenever I want food. Since there is a McDonald's close to campus, I have occasionally driven there after drinking". The location of the college that the study was conducted in requires a considerate amount of driving for someone under the influence to get food, except for the McDonalds that is just five minutes around the corner. For someone who considers distance to be a major deciding factor for driving after drinking, it would not be shocking to say that they would do so on a week to week basis, or as this person stated that they do so "occasionally".

Expenses

The most common theme that influenced people to drive after drinking was not having to pay UberEats fees. We received answers like: "It's way more expensive to order it than to just drive there... We [friends] usually see who's the most fit to drive and then we try to find the closest open fast-food restaurant", and "the delivery fees on UberEats and other delivery apps become up-charged when it gets late and there aren't many drivers in the area. Normally most places have around a \$3 delivery fee but when there aren't many drivers I've seen the delivery fee go up to \$15, which forces me to drive there despite drinking earlier".

These answers were definitely expected considering our sample consisted of majority college students who simply claim they do not have the funds to spend the extra money for delivery fees or gas. In the grand scheme of things, people failed to consider the consequences of drunk driving and could not bother to settle for an extra five dollar delivery fee. This tends to be a common theme for younger drivers who do not evaluate the risks, but rather attempt to avoid paying the slightest bit of extra money. What is even more daunting is that those who are driving are typically with a group of people who could essentially split the cost, making the delivery fee one to two dollars at most.

Discussion

Our findings essentially went against everything that was written in the literature study. The results suggested that most people who drive after drinking have a feeling for when they are not able to drive. However, research suggests that this may not always be the case and impairments during driving can occur at lower levels of BAC (Andrews et al., 2021). What was interesting, however, is that the participants who answered "no" to if they thought they were a societal threat, were also those who responded with feelings of guilt and relief after getting out of the car.

Additionally, participants who reported that they would determine who out of their friend group was most fit to drive was not something out of the ordinary. One of the study's that we reviewed shed light on the fact that people who have the willingness to drive after drinking tend to conduct self-evaluations of themselves or others before getting behind the wheel (Van Dyke et al., 2014). Not to mention that college students represented one of the most at-risk population for doing so.

Our data would have been more comparable had we a bigger sample size. Having only nine participants limited us to not hearing about riskier drunk driving instances that would have helped enhance our findings. If we had the chance, we would collect data from college students from different colleges and universities in order to have a bigger variety.

Our study had some limitations because the participants were from a small private school where they own nicer cars that they may not be as keen on damaging it because they have the funds to fix it. We concluded that it was not representative of the country's population of college students. The private school student demographic is typically wealthier than the regular student which indicates that their parent's may have more power and money to get their child off on a lesser charge or simply just pay money for bail. It may suggest why our results consisted of similar responses. This, however, is conflicting because it does not answer why students are not willing to pay the extra money for delivery fees but rather supports the fact that they consider speed, cost, and comfort when choosing transportation (Murez, 2022).

Conclusions

Driving under the influence is not something to be handled lightly — nor should it ever. It is disquieting to know that college students are the most at risk for fatalities in a DUI crash, and to collect first-hand data of students we know personally to be associated with the same deviant behavior was shocking. The patterns we identified revolved around the idea that young adults felt a sense of comfort getting behind the wheel after drinking, without noting any miscalculations or mistakes. This finding was especially daunting considering the fact that college students are the most inexperienced drivers and drinkers in its own category to begin with (Usdan et al., 2002). Participants also noted that the distance of their trip would affect their decision to drink and drive; however, this response was mostly associated with driving to get

food, which seemed to be a common theme after a night out, suggesting that, although students were not driving long distances, intoxication would not influence a short trip to a restaurant like McDonalds. These findings came hand in hand with the "unnecessary expense" arguments where students did not feel the need to pay delivery fees for food, and that driving would be the most logical option.

The application of our findings aim towards fighting against driving under the influence. There is a legal limit of 0.08% BAC that has been continuously proven by research to not be an accurate measure of intoxication because someone with a lower concentration could still be impaired (Andrews et al., 2021). Unfortunately, measuring the levels of intoxication will not stop people, especially young adults, from driving after drinking because there is no accurate way to do so before getting behind the wheel. In order to reduce drunk driving for the demographic most at risk, we need to continue to identify and emphasize the fatalities that occur daily from drunk driving and show participants that it only takes one time to be part of the statistic.

When it comes to ride sharing or ordering food, a good way to prevent someone from driving even just a short distance after a night of drinking is to split the price with friends for Uber or UberEats. There is now an option to "split fare" that will calculate the amount that each person in a group owes (Anders, 2022). This prevents people from fearing that they will not get paid back for ordering a trip and is proven to encourage taking an Uber or ordering in food instead of risking the drive. Out of 20 studies that were conducted on the impact of ride-sharing, 85% of them suggested that ride-sharing led to lower levels of drunk driving as well as reduced alcohol-related crashes (Murez, 2022). Additionally, it is important to advocate for self-protection of young people — starting with educating our young adults about the consequences and making it known that people lose their license everyday and have to start all over again, and

to install breathalyzers in their car or even admitting into rehab is costly. Just in Florida, the cost of an ignition interlock device can cost up to \$125 USD per month (Intoxalock, n.d.). Although the main purpose of our study is not to stop drunk driving, as that is not our expertise, the numbers really say a lot and it has become more than just a study on the relationship of college students and drunk driving; it is an epidemic that requires education and preventative measures that start with studies like this.

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