

The Decrease in Drunk Driving from the 1970s to Present

Drunk driving has embedded itself within contemporary American culture. Drive down any major highway and you are bound to see at least one sign adorned with a slogan like “Stay Alive Don’t Drink and Drive.” Much of the cultural prominence that drunk driving currently holds can be traced back to the early 1980s, when advocacy groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) gained popularity. This initial spring of movements has given rise to greater stigmatization of drunk driving, harsher legal penalties, and increasingly advanced means of education about the issue. In the wake of these developments, deaths in drunk driving related accidents have been on a steady decline since the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) started reporting data in 1982.

According to the 2019 traffic fatality data from the NHTSA’s Fatality Analysis Reporting System (NHTSA, 2019), the year had the lowest percentage of alcohol-related driving fatalities on record. The NHTSA considers a case to be an alcohol-impaired driving fatality when there is a “fatality in a crash involving a driver or motorcycle rider (operator) with a BAC of .08 grams per deciliter (g/dL) or greater. According to the 2019 report, there was a 5.3% decrease in Alcohol-impaired driving from 2018 to 2019. This meant that alcohol-impaired driving fatalities accounted for 28% of overall fatalities, the lowest overall percentage on record.

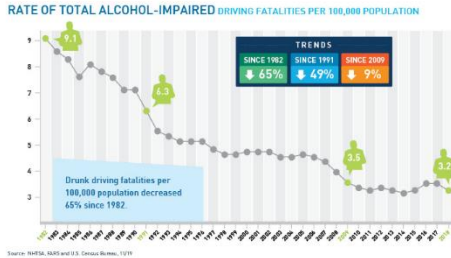
The 2019 FARS statistics are a continuation of a trend that has been

Table 8
Total and Alcohol-Impaired-Driving* Fatalities, 2018 and 2019

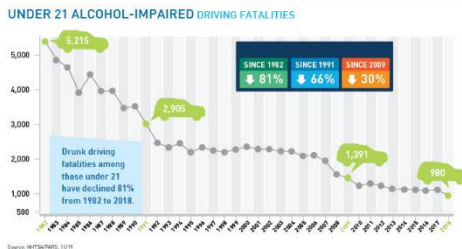
	2018	2019	Change	% Change
Total Fatalities	36,835	36,096	-739	-2.0%
Alcohol-Impaired-Driving Fatalities	10,710	10,142	-568	-5.3%

Source: FARS 2018 Final File, 2019 ARF
*See definition in text.

Alcohol-Impaired Driving Fatalities 1982-2018



Under 21 Alcohol-Impaired Driving Fatalities 1982-2018



prevalent for decades. In 2018, it was shown that alcohol impaired driving deaths had decreased by 65% since 1982. There was an even sharper decrease in alcohol impaired driving deaths among underage drivers. In 1982, there were 5,215 deaths. In 2018 there were 980. This leaves an 81% increase in drunk driving fatalities among those under 21 years of age.

The reasons for this decline can be associated with the increase in stigmatization and education surrounding drunk driving. To a lesser extent, there has been a correlation between this decrease and the harsher legal punishments adopted for charges of driving under the influence (DUI).

Among the most pressing elements of receiving a DUI is the stigma surrounding it (Kimberly Berry,

2021). It beyond a mere court citation or even a fine or jail sentence, resulting in the consequences of having committed such an act being imprinted not only in the minds of the perpetrator but in the minds of their friends, family members, and anyone else in their social circle. In short, being convicted of a DUI results in a significant amount of social stigma that goes beyond even the legal consequences of a conviction. Often this stigma is institutionalized. Some regions have policies of public shaming for DUI arrests. This is often accomplished by posting names and mug shots of those arrested for DUI charges in local crime logs. Even aside

from institutionalized shaming, DUI charges can ruin the relationship that one has with their friends and family, adding a permanent social mark on their record.

A less overtly harsh potential drive toward the prevention of drunk driving can be found in the increase of education on the issue. As awareness and advocacy has increased over the past few decades, educational measures have increased with them. For instance, School-Based Programs have been introduced with the goal of educating students about the dangers of impaired driving (Community Preventive Services Task Force, 2014). These have led to the growth of peer-based organizations such as Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) which seek to instill social norms that could lead to a reduction in drunk driving, particularly among the youth. While data surrounding education is not necessarily concrete, there has been some degree of sufficient evidence that the programs have been successful.

The adoption of harsher punishment for drunk driving is perhaps the most complicated of the three measures. Aside from some consistencies, like the .08% legal limit for BAC, punitive policies around drunk driving have been variable on a state-by-state basis. These variations often occur along the lines of minimum jail time, whether license suspension is a penalty, and whether or not there are additional penalties. States like Arizona and Georgia have strict policies while states like Ohio and South Dakota have more lenient policies. While there are some cases in which lenient DUI laws correlate with higher fatality rates and vice versa, this is not a universal phenomenon. For instance, “the five states with the lowest DUI fatality rates in 2018 ranged in DUI strictness from #4 (Kansas/Oklahoma) tied to #45 (New Jersey)” (Shawn, 2021). A similar trend existed for states with the highest fatality rates. The inconsistencies within this factor demonstrate that stigma and education can be seen as the primary factors contributing to the decrease in alcohol-related driving deaths.

In sum, there has been a relatively consistent decrease in drunk-driving related deaths since the 1970s. This decline first became particularly noticeable with the formation of advocacy groups in the early 1980s. Since then, stigmatization, educational initiatives, and, to a lesser extent, harsher punishments have most likely contributed to this decline.

Works Cited

<https://driversed.com/trending/driving-under-influence-do-strict-duit-laws-really-work>

<https://www.nhtsa.gov/press-0-releases/roadway-fatalities-2019->

<fars#:~:text=As%20a%20result%2C%20the%20fatality,100%20million%20VMT%20in%20201>

[8.](#)

<file:///C:/Users/benja/Downloads/Overview%20of%20Motor%20Vehicle%20Crashes%20in%202019.pdf>

<https://www.atlantaduiinformation.com/stigma-after-a-dui-conviction-or-even-a-dui-arrest>

<https://www.responsibility.org/long-term-trend-continues-show-decline-drunk-driving-fatalities>

<https://www.thecommunityguide.org/sites/default/files/assets/MVOI-AID-School-Instructional.pdf>