

Nation

Study: 31 million drove after drinking

But alcohol-impaired rates show decline

By Larry Copeland
USA TODAY

Nearly one in eight drivers 16 and older drove under the influence of alcohol in the past year, and more than 1% drove under the influence of illicit drugs, says a federal government report that sheds alarming light on the problem of impaired driving in the U.S.

An estimated 30.6 million people (13.2%) drove under the influence of alcohol, and an estimated 10.1 million (4.3%) drove under the influence of illicit drugs in the past year, according to the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. The estimates are based

on surveys of 213,350 people 16 and older from 2006 through 2009 by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA).

The survey did find some good news: Alcohol-impaired driving rates for the period 2006-09 compared with 2002-05 fell from 14.6% to 13.2%. Drugged-driving rates over the same periods fell from 4.8% to 4.3%.

"We can be pleasantly surprised that the numbers are going down," says Peter Delany, director of the Center for Behavioral Health Statistics and Quality. "That doesn't mean that they're great, but the numbers are going in the right direction. But it's not where we can rest on our laurels."

The survey found that younger drivers were more likely to admit getting behind the wheel after drinking or taking illicit drugs.

Rates of alcohol-impaired driving were 19.5% for people ages 16-25 compared with 11.8% for those 26 and older. Drugged-driving rates were about four times as high among the younger group, 11.4% compared with 2.8%.

Last year, 10,839 people died in drunken-driving crashes, 32% of all road deaths, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says. No such statistic is available for drugged driving; a survey of studies found that 18% of motor vehicle driver deaths involved drugs, SAMHSA says.

The findings mirror an AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety survey of

2,000 drivers in which 11% reported that they'd driven when they felt they were close to or over the legal alcohol limit; 50% said they'd done it more than once, says foundation CEO Peter Kissinger. "This is another instance of 'Do as I say, not as I do,'" he says. "In that same survey, 87% felt that drunk driving was a serious threat to their personal safety, and 98% said it was socially unacceptable to drink and drive. But we still have one in 10 drivers that are still doing it."

Five of the 10 states with the highest rates of impaired driving were in the Midwest: Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wisconsin. Four of the nine states with the lowest rates were in the South: Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi and West Virginia.