

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chi-0611200133nov20,1,4656324.story?coll=chi-opinionfront-hed>

An end to drunk driving

November 20, 2006

Americans of a certain age can remember when driving drunk was a source of amusing morning-after tales. Only in the 1980s, after the founding of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, did people begin to recognize that it was a terrible epidemic, killing tens of thousands of people every year. Today, no one laughs about intoxicated motorists.

The campaign against DUI has been a heartening success story, resulting in more aggressive enforcement, stiffer sentences, a higher drinking age and lower blood-alcohol limits. Thanks to these measures and the general change in attitudes, alcohol-related fatalities have declined by more than a third since 1982, saving some more than 8,000 lives last year.

That's the good news. The bad news is that almost all the improvement came by the mid-1990s. Since then, progress has stalled. So some 13,000 people die each year at the hands of drivers with a blood-alcohol content of .08 or more.

As MADD executive director Chuck Hurley puts it, if we're happy with more than 1,000 drunken driving fatalities a month, then we don't need to change a thing. But if we want to reduce the immense toll of bloodshed on our roads, it's time to try something different.

That something is the object of a MADD's new "campaign to eliminate drunk driving," to be launched Monday in cooperation with the federal Department of Transportation, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and even the Distilled Spirits Council of the United States. Some components are familiar enforcement tools, such as the expanded use of sobriety checkpoints, a proven tactic that 10 states still don't allow. But the centerpiece is a new emphasis on technological solutions, particularly ignition interlock devices to prevent convicted offenders from driving on suspended licenses.

This is an old and intractable problem. Police can arrest offenders and courts can revoke their driving privileges. But many keep driving anyway. Some end up in jail, but eventually they get out and go back to their deadly habits.

The obvious answer is a gadget installed on vehicles owned by convicted offenders, requiring them to pass a breath test to start the car. Though it's not foolproof--some drunks make their kids blow into the device--it has been found to prevent most recidivism. MADD anticipates that emerging technologies will be less intrusive and will allow for more widespread use in vehicles with the ultimate goal that no car could be operated by someone who is intoxicated.

Unfortunately, existing technology--the ignition interlock--has gotten little use in Illinois and most other states.

Advertisement

Gallo
FAMILY
VINEYARDS

We're all family.

Click here if you're 21 or older

Of the 1.4 million people arrested each year for DUI, only 100,000 end up with interlock devices. MADD wants to see a big expansion along the lines of what's being done in New Mexico, which now mandates interlocks for first offenders. The initial results are encouraging. Last year, alcohol-related fatalities in New Mexico dropped by nearly 12 percent from the previous year.

Under Gov. Jim Edgar, Illinois was a national leader in cracking down on drunken driving. But in recent years, the state has lagged behind other states. State Sen. John Cullerton (D-Chicago), however, plans to introduce legislation to greatly increase the use of ignition interlocks.

They are the most promising available tool for curbing a fatal scourge that still claims lives every day. The pertinent question is not "should we require them?" but "what are we waiting for?"

Copyright © 2006, [Chicago Tribune](#)