

Drugged Driving – A Growing Public Health and Public Safety Concern

In San Diego County, one of the most common reasons an adult is arrested is driving under the influence (DUI). While misdemeanor-level DUI arrests have recently declined (down 34% over the past five years), there was still an average of almost 28 DUI arrests per day in 2015, and there is growing attention to the fact that drivers are often impaired by drugs other than alcohol. Nationally, while alcohol use appears to be on the decline, drug use is up, driven primarily by increased marijuana use and prescription drug misuse¹. The effects of specific drugs on a driver's ability can vary depending on how they act on the brain and are confounded when individuals mix substances. For example, research has shown that marijuana users display slow reaction times and impaired judgment of time and distance, and that those under the influence of methamphetamine can display increased aggressiveness and recklessness². While fully understanding the scope of drugged driving is limited in part because there are no easily administered tests in the field, an individual could test positive for drugs in their blood but not have been impaired due to them at the time of the crash; and an individual could have used a drug in combination with alcohol and only alcohol is documented because it is easier to detect, below are some facts that we do know from national and local statistics.

- According to the San Diego County Medical Examiner, the number of motor vehicle-related fatalities has increased for five of the past six years, with **302 in 2015, compared to 211 in 2010**.
- In Colorado, marijuana-related traffic deaths increased 32 percent in one year and represented **20 percent of traffic deaths in 2014**, up from 10 percent in 2009³.
- A statewide survey for the California Office of Traffic Safety of weekend nighttime drivers in California in 2012 revealed that **more drivers tested positive for drugs that impaired driving (14%) than did for alcohol (7.3%)**. Of the drugs, marijuana was most prevalent (7.4%).
- Data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Fatal Analysis Reporting System (FARS) for California reveal that of the 19,543 drivers involved in a fatal collision between 2005 and 2014, **30 percent tested positive for at least one drug** and the percent positive has increased each year, from 26 percent in 2007 to 37 percent in 2014⁴.
- Interviews with adult arrestees in 2015, as part of SANDAG's Substance Abuse Monitoring (SAM) program, revealed that one in three (34%) reported they had ever been arrested for DUI as an adult, with 37 percent of these reporting more than one arrest. When asked what they were under the influence of for the most recent arrest, **27 percent said drugs alone, or drugs and alcohol**, with the two most common drugs being **methamphetamine (43%) and marijuana (39%)**.

With the recent legalization of recreational marijuana use in California by voters in November 2016, legislators in the State are currently exploring options to address this issue, including having the California Highway Patrol (CHP) lead a task force charged with identifying the best technology to test drivers that may be under the influence of drugs (AB 6) and making it illegal for anyone to drive with a blood alcohol level of .04 to .07 percent while also being under the influence of drugs (SB 698). These efforts, as well as additional research, are encouraged to better understand and address this growing issue of concern.

¹SAMHSA (2016). *Key Substance Use and Mental Health Indicators in the United States: Results from the 2015 National Survey on Drug Use and Health*. Rockville, MD: Author.

²National Institute on Drug Abuse (June 2016). *Drugged Driving*. Available on-line at <https://www.drugabuse.gov/publications/drugfacts/drugged-driving>.

³Rocky Mountain High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area (2014). *The Legalization of Marijuana in Colorado: The Impact*. Denver, CO: Author.

⁴California Department of Public Health (August 2016). *Drug Presence in Fatal Motor Vehicle Collisions, California, 2005-2014*. Available on-line at <https://www.cdph.ca.gov>.