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# How to Prevent Drunk Driving by Psychological and Legal Factors

Alcohol was first introduced to the United States in the late 1700s, when the average American drank three and a half gallons per year. In fact, Americans over the age of 15 consumed approximately seven gallons of alcohol annually by the 1830s. Over time, the consumption of the different forms of alcohol has been used for moments of sociability, enjoyment, relaxation, or to simply experience the various effects of the substance. Unfortunately, at the same rate that drinking for pleasure has risen, alcohol abuse and addiction have increased as well-- in 2018, 14.4 million adults ages 18 and older were reported to have Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD). Not only has AUD become the third leading preventable death, but the chances of a person hurting themselves or someone else increases once a drunk driver gets on the road. As a result of both the high rates of regular and abusive drinking, in 2017 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) determined that 29 people continually die every day due to driving under the influence (DUI) crashes in the United States, allowing for 1 death every 50 minutes. Because the influence of alcohol remains prevalent in present drivers, it is important to deduct the reasons why alcohol has led many to drive under the influence in the first place. My research essay will focus on determining the extent of the role that the driver's psychological and legal factors play in drunk driving accidents in the United States.

Through time, alcohol has driven a portion of the American population to develop either a craving or an unhealthy desire for the effect, leading to the high rates of driving under the influence. In just 2016 alone, "...more than 1 million drivers were arrested for driving under the influence of alcohol or narcotics" showing the evident impact that alcohol has had on American drivers. That being said, one of the first ways that this habit has affected many drivers is through the lack of federal regulation against the consumption of alcohol both off and on the road. These regulations include the minimum legal drinking age, blood alcohol concentration (BAC), and the determination of DUI convictions and arrests. In the United States, the current minimum drinking age is 21 years old. This was determined by the 1984 Minimum Drinking Age Act, which forbids people under this age from "purchasing or publicly possessing alcoholic beverages as a condition of receiving State highway funds". Yet when analyzing the rates of drunk driving crashes on our roads, drivers the ages 20 to 25 were involved in a total of 6,424 fatal car accidents, counting for at least 513 more accidents than any other age group of drivers in just 2016 alone. The debate as to whether or not the minimum drinking age is effective remains an issue and has evidently affected the rates of drunk driving crashes over time.

Another way that the ineffectiveness of American law is also seen is within the limits of the BAC

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threshold. In most American states, the BAC limit is .08 g/d. If a driver is caught past this limit, they will suffer through the proper, legal consequences decided on by the state. Presumably, one would think that these laws would allow for immense control of the drinking population, but with the statistics seen over the years, it has been the opposite of the truth. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, out of the 10,874 people who died in drunk driving crashes in 2017, 6,618 drivers (61%) had a BAC of .08 g/dL or higher. Because over half of the drivers involved in drunk driving-related crashes were found to be legally impaired, which were made up of mostly drivers of the minimum drinking age, the extent of whether the U.S. laws have done enough to prevent drunk driving accidents remains in question as well. After analyzing the ineffectiveness of the legal factors of the drunk driving conflict, it is also crucial to consider the psychological background of the drivers on American roads. In 2018, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) found that a total of 14.4 million adults ages 18 and older have AUD. AUD, like many other forms of substance abuse, is known for consumers' compulsive use of alcohol, inability to control levels of alcohol, and "a negative emotional state when not using", which has led many to have further social and behavioral problems both outside and inside their personal life.

In 2004, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) stated that binge drinkers are defined as those who pass the .08 g/dL BAC limit when consuming 4 to 5 drinks in about 2 hours, also go through the aftermath of their habits. In the journal article "Addiction, Drinking Behavior, and Driving Under the Influence", researchers from Duke University investigated the roles of the driver's personality factors, levels of alcohol consumption and other substance use, and the overall addiction related to driving while impaired. According to Sloan and other researchers, one of the first ways that both binge drinkers and those with AUD have suffered through these consequences is through their engagement in risky behaviors due to their dismissal of the consequences that arise from their actions. Moreover, studies have also shown that many individuals are "present-oriented" in which they "discount the future heavily, and/or experience difficulty in executing their plans". Because those suffering from addictions and abuse do not have the capacity to make the best decisions, the psychological backgrounds of the people driving while impaired evidently will highly affect the rates of drunk driving crashes in the United States.

Similarly, an additional problem that displays the role of psychological factors in the drinking and driving population is the lack of treatment for those suffering from addiction or abuse. As the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) estimated only 7.9 percent of adults who had AUD in 2018 received treatment, it is inevitable to note the recurrence of drunk driving accidents and loss of control while on the road. Without the proper treatment available to those with psychological problems, it will be very difficult to target the American drunk driving issue. Because of these behavioral problems and the lack of treatment for people suffering from abuse and addiction, the habit of driving impaired arises within this

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heavy drinking population. Therefore, it can be safely concluded that the psychological factors of an alcohol consumer extensively affect the high rates of drunk driving crashes in the United States. Despite revealing the lack of federal control and psychological problems that American drivers face, many have rejected the idea of implementing stricter rules/methods to face the social issue.

In the National Commission Against Drunk Driving, *Drunk Driving in America - The Great Debate*, several of the prevailing issues of drunk driving were discussed, such as the 0.08% legal BAC limit, vehicle confiscation due to DUI, and the requirement of testing drivers in fatal and/or serious accidents across the United States. When the topic of lowering the BAC threshold to prevent drunk driving accidents was first introduced to the President of the American Beverage Institute, Rick Berman, he disagreed with the way they were attempting to fix the situation. In other words, not only did he find the modification of the law ineffective, but he provided further analysis refuting the data presented by Ralph Hingston on the effectiveness of 0.08% BAC laws. For example, Berman defended his premise by stating that there was “no difference between having one drink, too many, or a bottle too many” and even questioned what would ultimately happen to the drivers caught at the .079 percentage, when still causing an accident. He believed that there was no reason for changing it. To this day, most states in the U.S. are still at the .08 g/d limit, which shows yet another reason for how the legal factors provoke citizens to continue driving under the influence, and the overall rates of drunk driving accidents.

It is evident that both psychological and legal factors have impacted the American population as a whole, therefore it is necessary to consider the ways to find solutions to the issue. According to 'Alcohol in America: Taking Action to Prevent Abuse' by the National Research Council's authors Steve Olson and Dean Gerstein, one of the proper techniques needed to prevent drunk driving accidents is through national public policy, such as increased tax prices, enforced minimum age requirements, decreased number of sales at stores, more arrests, and even the actions of the servers at all alcohol facilities. These legal actions have the ability to change the high rates of accidents in the United States. For example, in the case that more arrests were placed at a national level, many studies have shown a significant decrease in driving while under the influence in general. This example was seen when the Road Safety Act in Britain decreased these types of driving fatalities by 23 percent just after three months it was implemented. As time progressed, researchers found that this act did not necessarily change the rate of drinking amongst the British population, moreover, it altered the habits that the British population had before this act came about-- such as “driving to and from pubs...walking to pubs (and)... a number of less conveniently located pubs closed”. Evidently, the Road Safety Act changed the course of the traffic fatalities and accidents, but most significantly, altered the overall consciousness of the drinking population. Not only can this form of prevention potentially decrease the high rates of drunk driving in the United States, but it reveals the flaws of the legal

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control of drunk drivers.

In addition to targeting the issue through the modifications of laws like the Road Safety Act, the implementation of alcohol ignition locks in all DUI offenders' vehicles should also be considered. Joseph Marutollo, a graduate of the Pace University of Law, researched this way to solve this issue in his article, "No Second Chances: Leandra's Law and Mandatory Alcohol Ignition Interlocks for First-Time Drunk Driving Offenders" in 2012. MADD describes the locks as a "small, sophisticated device – about the size of a cell phone – which is installed into the starting circuit of a vehicle". Before starting the car, drivers must also blow an estimated 1.5 liters of air into the alcohol ignition interlock, allowing for the vehicle to actually start. These locks will allow for better control of offenders of the traffic laws, and establish a possible decrease in drunk driving accidents because of the extra precautions taken prior to starting the vehicle. The United States laws and regulations implemented to prevent car accidents are not working to their potential as they present a continual lack of traffic control and easiness in driving privileges, therefore having their effectiveness still at risk.

Yet another important way to create a solution to the social issue of drunk driving is by changing the overall consciousness of the American population. A 2010 article published by the School of Health and Social Care at Oxford Brookes University states that "if an individual believes that their peers drink heavily; this will, in turn, influence the amount of alcohol that a person drinks" which directly implies the grand impact that we, as members of this society, have on one another. As a collective population, we are not doing enough to remain under the same consciousness of what is and is not socially acceptable. In this case, driving while under the influence has become a prevalent habit over the years, and whether it is caused by legal, psychological, or even social factors, it must be stopped to decrease the fatal statistic. In order to change the social acceptance related to drunk drinking, we must encourage and increase media influence, campaign impact, and overall awareness brought upon the issue. An organization that has shown this kind of action in the United States is Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD). Founded back in 1980 by mother and activist Candy Lightner, MADD has now become a widely known, non-profit organization that continually works towards changing the drunk driving statistics and social consciousness in America. Not only have they focused on changing laws and legislative ruling, but this organization has focused on the basis of the drunk driving problem among our younger and older populations. Implementation of research-based programs for parents and adults, numerous fundraisers, awareness events, and TV PSA's, have shown their power as an organization. From 1980 to 2015, MADD's campaign strategies to defeat drunk driving habits have helped save over 330,000 lives and decreased the number of deaths by 55% in the United States since its founding. Evidently, mass media and campaigns like MADD, can help change the direction that many of our American drivers are taking, despite the psychological and legal factors that can come into play.

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Through further analysis of two of the most prevalent factors that lead a person to drink and drive, I have concluded that psychological factors carry a higher degree of influence on drunk driving accidents in the United States because of the heavyweight it places on a person. Similarly, legal factors also play a major role in allowing for the recurrent event of drinking and driving on our roads, because of the flaws of our federal regulations. As mentioned, social factors such as the common consciousness of our country, place a great impact on society and the opinions formed around this ongoing dilemma. To fix the issue, the proper actions taken by our population as a whole can influence the drunk driving accidents that happen every day. Ultimately, I focused on determining the extent of the role that the driver's psychological and legal factors play in drunk driving accidents in the United States.

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