Office for Victims of Crime
Training and Technical Assistance Center

Impaired Driving

1 in a series of 8 resource papers:

- Child Abuse and Neglect
- Elder Abuse
- Homicide
- Human Trafficking
- Identity Theft
- Impaired Driving
- Intimate Partner Violence
- Sexual Assault
Impaired Driving*

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the trends and issues service providers should consider when assisting survivors of impaired driving crimes.

Adults 21 and over who drink alcohol are not committing a crime (unless refraining from alcohol is a condition of probation or parole), and alcohol, although a dangerous drug, is still acceptable in many social settings. This was not always the case. The history of the United States includes tensions between those who were proponents of the sale and use of alcohol, and those who were opposed. Ultimately, during the years 1920–1933, after passage of the 18th Amendment to the U. S. Constitution, the U. S. enacted the National Prohibition (Volstead) Act, prohibiting the “manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors.”¹ Legal prohibition against alcohol was based on both practical and religious foundations, as many advocates of temperance believed that the use of alcohol was immoral.

During the years between the repeal of Prohibition in 1933 and the early 1970s, society and government struggled to find the balance between freedom of choice and the damage to society by alcohol problems.² During that time, as the highway and roadway system expanded and more individuals purchased automobiles and began to drive, the problems of impaired driving increased.

Since the early 1970s, impaired driving has been taken seriously. Law enforcement, advocacy groups, and survivors have done an exceptional job of educating the public about the problems caused by impaired drivers and passing laws to increase penalties for adults and youth. The work of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) is a particularly salient example of the work of victim advocates to raise the issue of drunk driving higher on the public agenda resulting in positive changes in federal and state laws.

Those who drive while under the influence of alcohol or other drugs create both a public health and safety problem and a criminal and juvenile justice problem. Although the term “drunk driving” was used to describe offenses, “impaired driving” is more accurate as it encompasses any reduction of driving skill and avoids the subjective definition of “drunk” which has not been defined scientifically.

It is not unusual for service providers to feel conflicted about impaired driving crimes, if professionals drink alcohol or have history with drugs. However, it is important to understand how society views these crimes, how the criminal justice system addresses them, and the impact of impaired driving crimes on injured persons, survivors of those

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killed by impaired drivers, and witnesses to crashes. The research provides more context for the problem.

**Statistics**

- In 2009, more than 10,000 people died in alcohol-impaired driving crashes - one every 51 minutes according to the National Highway and Traffic Administration (NHTSA). Although numbers have decreased since 2008, impaired driving remains problematic in the United States.

- In 2010, according to the FBI, approximately 1.4 million people were arrested for driving under the influence (DUI) in the United States.

- In 2009, 56 percent of alcohol-impaired drivers and motor-cyclists involved in fatal crashes had a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of .15 or greater, nearly twice the legal limit (.08 or higher) in all states and the District of Columbia according to NHTSA.

- The juvenile arrest rate for DUI increased 49 percent between 1993 and 1999, and then fell to 41 percent between 1999 and 2009 according to the Department of Justice.

- In 2009, 14 percent of youth age 14 and under killed in crashes died in alcohol-related incidents. According to NHTSA, 51 percent of these were occupants of a vehicle with a driver who had a BAC level of .08 or higher.

- Driving under the influence of alcohol was associated with age with a peak at 23.4 percent for 21- to 25-year-olds, then generally declining for older ages according to NHTSA.

- Alcohol use is the leading contributing factor in 19 percent of fatal boating accidents and the leading factor in 16 percent of the deaths according to the U.S. Coast Guard.

- During the last 30 days, 24.1% of students nationwide in 2011 had ridden at least once in a vehicle with a driver who had been drinking alcohol according to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS).

- In the 2011 YRBS, 72 percent of all deaths among youth and young adults aged 10–24 years resulted from four causes; the highest one was motor vehicle crashes, at 26 percent.

Additional information on impaired driving can be accessed from MADD at www.MADD.org.
Definitions

**Alcohol problems**: Replaces the term “alcohol abuse” which is not measurable or easily defined. Resulting problems may include physical, mental, or community-related outcomes.

**Alcohol consumption**: Used in reference to measuring amount of alcohol drunk, sales data, and drinking behavior patterns among populations or individuals.

**Alcoholism**: Indicates a severe dependency on alcohol. A person who is addicted to alcohol finds it difficult to stop drinking, develops a tolerance for increased amounts of alcohol, and shows symptoms of withdrawal when drinking is stopped.

**BAC**: Blood alcohol concentration, determined based on a breath, blood, or a urine test which measures the level of alcohol present in a person’s system.

**Binge drinking**: Ingesting five or more drinks (for men) and four or more drinks (for women) on one occasion. It involves drinking more alcohol and more rapidly than the body can process efficiently, resulting in serious and fast inebriation.

Unique Impact/Effects on Victims/Survivors

Victims of impaired driving include primary persons (those who are injured or killed by an impaired driver) and secondary (family members and friends of those who are injured or killed by an impaired driver). Secondary survivors also may include witnesses to impaired driving crashes who are affected by having witnessed often horrifying incidents and their aftermath.

In many cases, the impact of impaired driving on survivors can be similar to the impact of other types of crimes, especially homicide. However, there are some important differences. The Office for Victims of Crime (OVC) has identified the following effects of impaired driving:

- **Physical and mental trauma caused by knowledge that your body or that of a loved one was damaged or disfigured**. The human body is unable to withstand the impact of a car crash, even at low speed. Some survivors may experience only minor injuries; others may experience moderate to massive physical injury. Physically injured survivors who live often undergo years of medical treatment and surgery, and may never return to their pre-crash state. As a result, survivors often have to recreate a new sense of identity for themselves.

- **Feeling of unbearable loss**. The reactions of families and friends whose loved ones are killed in a crash are similar to those experienced by survivors of homicide victims. The sudden and violent nature of the death is often shocking, even hard to
believe. Extremely intense emotions and an overwhelming sense of grief and loss often follow initial shock. The fact that the death was someone’s fault and was preventable adds to the feelings of profound loss.

- **Emotional swings.** Survivors may feel as though their emotions are out of control. A wide array and intensity of emotions are possible, and it is important to recognize that each individual’s reactions will be unique, as is how they express them. The senselessness of the crime, the preventable nature, and the complications of being involved with the criminal justice system may make the emotional reactions more complex.

- **Guilt.** Survivors may feel guilty for living when others did not, or may feel remorse about not being able to protect their friends and loved ones who were critically injured or killed. While this type of “survivor guilt” does not make sense, it is real.

- **Sense of vulnerability.** Many survivors feel a heightened sense of vulnerability, especially while in a vehicle or even as a pedestrian. They can no longer trust that other drivers are sober or that oncoming drivers will stay on their side of the road.

- **Nightmares or flashbacks.** Survivors who experienced the crash first-hand will often relive the event through dreams or flashback experiences, which feels as though the event is occurring in real time. Survivors who were not involved in the crash scene also may have dreams of the event, and their imaginations may produce vivid images of how they think the crash might have been for their loved ones.

- **Sleep disturbances.** Some survivors report changes in their abilities to fall asleep or stay asleep, with or without the additional problems of nightmares or vivid dreams. When people cannot get adequate sleep, they often find getting through the day difficult.

- **Depression and feelings of hopelessness.** Some survivors may experience “simple” depression while others may develop clinically significant symptoms. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, symptoms of depression include—

  - Persistent sad, anxious, or an “empty” mood.
  - Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism.
  - Feelings of guilt, worthlessness, helplessness.
  - Loss of interest or pleasure in activities that were once enjoyed, including sex.
  - Decreased energy, fatigue, being “slowed down.”
  - Difficulty concentrating, remembering, making decisions.
Insomnia, early-morning awakening, or oversleeping.

Appetite and/or weight loss or overeating and weight gain.

Thoughts of death or suicide, suicide planning and attempts.

Restlessness, irritability.

Persistent physical symptoms that do not respond to treatment, such as headaches, digestive disorders, and chronic pain.

These and other effects of impaired driving crashes may devastate survivors for years or a lifetime. When others do not appreciate the magnitude of the crime or minimize its after effects, problems can be exacerbated. For example, impaired driving is minimized when crashes are referred to as “accidents” and impaired drivers are considered merely tragic figures who made senseless “mistakes.” Survivors of impaired driving crashes and of those who were killed feel as though they are survivors of a violent assault or homicide, but they often are not treated in that way.

This sense of being the victim of a “lesser” crime is affirmed when the criminal justice system does not treat impaired driving crashes that result in death or serious injury as the priority they do for other violent deaths or assaults. Impaired driving offenses often result in much lower charges and sentences – and sometimes result in no sanction. The survivor rightly perceives that the offender “got away with” a serious crime.

Effective Responses for Victim Support and Advocacy, Medical and Mental Health Treatment, and Advocacy for Justice System Participation

Understand Impaired Driving Laws

A driver is considered to be illegally driving “under the influence” of alcohol in all 50 states and the District of Columbia when he or she has a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of .08 or higher.\textsuperscript{13} An even lower BAC of .05 constitutes “legal impairment” in many states. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, all states have established low BAC limits of .00 to .02 for drivers under 21 years of age.\textsuperscript{14} These “zero tolerance” laws are an important tool for reducing impaired driving by youth. A driver is “impaired” by alcohol when his or her ability to think clearly, process information, see, hear, walk, talk, or judge distances is below normal. All of these abilities are needed in order to drive safely. Impaired driving involves a tension between acts of overconsumption versus acts of those who are addicted to alcohol.
Some people feel more sympathetic towards drivers who are alcoholics because they have a disease, while drivers who are not alcoholics are viewed less sympathetically and as being more culpable. Other people feel the social drinker made a bad mistake and the addict should take the necessary steps to ensure safety. As a service provider, you will encounter these distinct and often controversial points of view when working on impaired driving cases. It is important to keep in mind that impairment of the ability to operate a vehicle begins the moment a person begins to drink alcohol, regardless of whether the drinker ingested a “social” drink, accidentally consumed “too much,” or drank excessively.

Many drivers cited for impaired driving maintain that they never intended to drive impaired, nor did they intend to harm a person or their property. In many crimes, conviction is related to “intent.” However, in today’s climate, and with the advocacy of anti-impaired driving organizations, the justice system as well as society maintains that while most drunk drivers do not intend to use their automobile as a weapon, that is in fact the risk that is borne, and subsequent harm will be viewed as deliberate. Mass communication and education have saturated our communities with information to let people know that if they intend to drive, they must either refrain from drinking to the level of impairment, or they must obtain a “designated driver” to drive for them. Unfortunately, education campaigns are usually limited in their results and do not address the larger scope of the problem of alcohol-related problems associated with violence and other crime.

Impaired driving is exacerbated by use of drugs such as marijuana, prescription drugs, or other illicit chemicals and is now sometimes called drugged driving. Conversely, the proliferation of texting, cell phone use while driving, incidents of “road rage,” eating while driving, and/or drowsiness are also problematic. Even a driver with a very limited amount of alcohol impairment may drive more erratically due to distractions and activity unrelated to alcohol.

**Assist Survivors**

Survivors can be anyone: drivers and passengers in a single car, those involved in multi-car crashes, and even pedestrians or bicyclists. Survivors can include family, friends, colleagues, schoolmates, and acquaintances. The lives of survivors, witnesses, and even the offenders are radically altered, often forever. In addition, impaired driving crimes are not always simple and clear, and create complicated situations. For example, consider these scenarios and try to identify the survivors/victims and the offenders:

- Driver A is under the influence of alcohol. Driver B is sober but, momentarily distracted, runs a stop sign. Driver A, who is not speeding, broadsides Driver B, who sustains serious injuries. The crash is cited as alcohol-related.
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- Driver A has a BAC of .07. Pedestrian B has a BAC of .24 and is playing “chicken” with oncoming traffic. Driver A strikes Pedestrian B with her car, killing Pedestrian B. The fatality is cited as alcohol-related and Driver A is arrested.

- Driver A is sober and driving without a seatbelt. Driver A also has children in the car who are unrestrained. Driver B has a BAC of .06 and is wearing a seatbelt. Driver A pulls in front of Driver B without signaling and strikes Driver B’s vehicle. The children all receive minor injuries. The crash is cited as alcohol-related.

What can a service provider do? Depending on the type of program, providers may work with impaired driving survivors:

- In the immediate aftermath of the crime, beginning at the point of the death or injury notification (e.g., victim service providers working in a law enforcement agency or community-based program or crisis response team).

- Long after the crime has occurred (e.g., victim service providers working in a prosecutor’s office, in corrections, or in a therapeutic setting).

Educate Yourself

- First, learn what the BAC levels of impairment are in your state and other state laws (some are lower than .08). In addition to your state’s BAC, take a look at:
  - Graduated licensing provisions and other youth prevention initiatives.
  - Felony and habitual offender laws.
  - Mandatory testing and refusal penalties.
  - Child endangerment laws.
  - Ignition interlock devices, plate sanctions, and other penalties.

- Second, track data on emerging trends such as drugged driving, including the use of marijuana or prescription drugs while operating a vehicle or boat. Check with your local police department and consult federal agencies working on this issue, including the Office of National Drug Control Policy at www.whitehouse.gov/ondcp/drugged-driving, the Department of Transportation at www.dot.gov, and the Drug Enforcement Agency at www.justice.gov/dea/driving_drugged.html.

- Third, familiarize yourself with the responses of your local criminal justice system to the crime of impaired driving. Talk to law enforcement officers, prosecutors, judges, and advocacy groups to determine if impaired driving crimes are taken seriously in your jurisdiction as well as to learn about the challenges to enforcement and
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prosecution. Participate in a ride-along with police officers as they implement sobriety checkpoints.

- Fourth, attend a victim impact panel to hear accounts of impaired driving crashes from survivors. Such panels (designed in the early 1980s as an educational and prevention program for offenders) are offered in many communities or in correctional settings. As a new service provider, you will find it helpful to hear from survivors in a setting where you are not the direct service provider how impaired driving devastated their lives.

- Fifth, obtain education about physical injuries, especially traumatic brain injury (TBI). TBI is a common injury that is often undiagnosed after vehicular crashes. Even minor injuries can have significant ramifications for survivors, and a service provider should learn enough to feel comfortable around injured and possibly disfigured survivors. In addition, providers should become familiar with disability rights and services available to newly physically or mentally challenged people through state and local departments of rehabilitation services and local centers for independent living.

- Finally, commit to providing thorough and effective victim assistance to survivors and witnesses of impaired driving crimes.

Work With Survivors

What you do will depend on your role and the stage of the process at which you encounter the survivor. In all cases, it will be important to remember to—

- Refer to the event as an impaired driving crash or crime and not an accident. Although the driver did not have the intent to cause harm, he or she made the decision to drink and drive. When you talk about impaired driving in this way, you avoid minimizing the pain and suffering of survivors. In addition, some survivors prefer to think that their loved one was killed in an impaired driving crash, rather than died.

- Ask the survivor what they would like to talk about. Let them choose the direction. Follow their lead. Talking about the crash is helpful for many people, and is a way of “processing” trauma. As a new provider, this will help get you into the practice of shifting power to survivors to empower them, be validated, and share their stories.

- Acknowledge the suddenness and randomness of the event. The utter inability to prepare for or try to avoid such a crime makes it more shocking, and the fact that it is senseless and preventable makes it harder to comprehend.

- Help them understand the criminal justice process, and tell them about the way your justice community handles impaired driving crimes. This may be difficult if your jurisdiction treats such crimes leniently, but they need to know up front – candidly
and frankly – what to expect. Some survivors may be angry that impaired driving offenders may receive light sentences, even if they have a record of multiple DUIs.

- Help them file for crime victim compensation, if eligible, or to follow up on orders of restitution, if that is part of the offender’s sentence.

- Ask the investigating law enforcement officer if you can assist in the return of any personal property to victims who were involved in an impaired driving crash.

- Offer to accompany a survivor who wants to visit the crash site or to see the wrecked vehicles. If you feel unprepared, invite a more experienced advocate to go with you.

- Help survivors write a victim impact statement. Even if they are going to give their impact statement orally in court, encourage them to provide a written version for the court’s record and possibly for a pre-sentence investigative report.

- Help survivors understand the support that may be available to them from programs including but not limited to—
  - Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) (www.madd.org).
  - Remove Intoxicated Drivers (RID) (www.rid-usa.org).
  - Alliance Against Intoxicated Motorists (AAIM) (www.aaim1.org).
  - Professional and peer counseling.
  - Grief and bereavement therapy and support groups.
  - Emergency financial assistance and other resources such as Social Security.
  - Vocational rehabilitation and independent living programs.

- Refer injured persons to specialists who are trained to understand chronic pain and long-term rehabilitation, if necessary. Some injured victims will require long-term medical care. Others may have serious but invisible injuries, such as traumatic brain injuries, that require special medical assistance.

- Before making any of the referrals above, make a site visit to those programs. Get to know the staff and specialists, so when you make a referral there will be assurances about what agencies can do to assist the survivor.

- Acknowledge the unique problems that occur when the offender is a family member or friend. Survivors may be distressed about the crime and angry toward the offender, at the same time that they continue to love and worry about the offender. It is particularly difficult to be both angry and sorrowful toward a family member or
friend who caused an impaired driving crash if the offender also feels intense remorse and guilt about the harm they caused. Survivors also may experience conflicting thoughts and emotions about an appropriate sentence for such an offender.

- When relevant, provide survivors with information about civil remedies available to them.

### Advocate for Justice System Participants

Sometimes, offenders must be caught and convicted of the offense multiple times before it is taken seriously, which is a problem. In many cases, impaired driving offenders are not sentenced severely until they have actually hurt or killed someone, and even automobile manslaughter cases are often not treated as seriously as other categories of manslaughter.

Some of the sentences a drunk driver might incur include—

- Citations such as tickets and points off the driver’s record.
- Monetary fines and restitution ranging from minimal to substantial.
- Attendance at a victim impact panel in the community or correctional setting.
- Probation after incarceration including supervision by a probation officer.
- Probation only with no incarceration, but being supervised by a probation officer.
- Alcohol or other drug treatment that may be supervised or unsupervised.
- Home arrest with or without an electronic monitoring/tracking device.
- An ignition interlock device that serves as a car alcohol breath screening tool that prevents a vehicle from starting if it detects a BAC over a pre-set limit of .02 (i.e., 20 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood). The device has been shown effective and is located inside the vehicle, near the driver’s seat, and is connected to the ignition system.\(^{16}\)
- Automatic license revocation that is temporary or permanent.
- Automatic license revocation with short or long jail sentences.
- Incarceration, including short or long sentences, and in some cases involving parole supervision upon return to the community.

Promising prevention measures include—
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- Supporting enactment and enforcement of laws of mandatory driver’s license suspension revocation for underage purchase, possession, or use of alcohol and other drugs, especially for youth consuming alcohol and marijuana.  
- Strengthening graduated licensing in states to reduce the number of alcohol- and drug-using youths who obtain driver’s licenses and alcohol and drug testing during phases of licensing. 
- Passing and enforcing bans on open containers to reduce impaired driving by deterring drinking while driving. Unfortunately, 14 states do not comply with open container laws according to NHTSA. 
- Support and advocacy of sobriety checkpoints by local police. 
- Enforcing federal minimum purchase and possession laws.

Cultural Sensitivity and Barriers to Reporting

Cultural Competence

Impaired driving crimes can happen to people of all ages, races, religious beliefs, and ethnicities. They can occur in all kinds of communities and neighborhoods, and to those who are wealthy as well as to those who are poor. One of the joys and difficulties of working as a provider is the opportunity to meet and work with people from varied backgrounds. It is possible to develop cultural sensitivity and competence to work with a wide variety of people.

You may encounter impaired driving survivors whose primary language is not English, or they may speak no English at all. Some may use American Sign Language. Translators and interpreters may need to be identified in your community for assistance. Children, teens, adults, and seniors may be those you serve. You may work with people of various races and ethnic backgrounds. You may encounter people who profess different faiths and religions. Some of the victims you work with may be gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered or be immigrants. People from various cultures may have differing perspectives about impaired driving, and an astute victim service provider will attempt to learn something about such beliefs.

Victim advocates who work in busy organizations must be efficient and productive, and must be prepared to work in a diverse environment. To assist with this goal, the National MultiCultural Institute (NMCI) (www.nmci.org) has partnered with the Office for Victims of Crime to develop the Cultural Considerations in Assisting Victims of Crime program.
Barriers to Reporting

Once an impaired driving crash has occurred, it is likely to be reported to law enforcement, either by the occupants of the vehicle(s) or by a witness. However, there are sometimes barriers to reporting impaired driving. For example, a family member or a friend who is aware that someone they know may be intoxicated and driving may not report to law enforcement because they are “hoping” that nothing will happen and that the driver will get to his or her destination without causing harm. Or, an individual may be reluctant to report a driver who is a primary wage earner and a report might result in financial hardships, such as higher automobile insurance, loss of a driver’s license or job, court costs, or medical or alcohol treatment costs. Some may be reluctant to report because they fear retaliation by the driver later if the driver suspects or learns that a report was made.

Future Considerations

Impaired driving remains the standard by which other forms of careless or inattentive driving are measured. Studies examining the increased risk for crashes caused by red light running, texting, cell phone use, drowsiness, and other means by which driving skills are reduced often compare their findings to the risk found in impaired driving. For example, one review of problematic driving includes distractions from eating, cell phone use, and texting that increase the risk of crashing. Whether or not opponents of other forms of dangerous driving are as successful in changing laws and public opinion as the impaired driving movement remains to be seen. This reform will depend on whether or not individuals harmed by these actions perceive themselves to be survivors of “crimes” that merit similar social and criminal justice responses as well as the degree to which these behaviors are formally prohibited via legislation.
Endnotes


2 Ibid.


11 Ibid.


18 Ibid.


