

Drinking and Driving in the Big Sky State

KEY INSIGHTS FROM YOUNG ADULTS

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First, what exactly is the problem?

Evidence suggests that both alcohol and marijuana can impair cognitive and psychomotor performance and increase the likelihood of a motor vehicle crash. Approximately one-third of traffic fatalities in the United States involve an alcohol-impaired driver, and about 1 out of 6 crashes involves a drug other than alcohol. In Montana, people frequently drink alcohol, and marijuana is the illicit drug most commonly used. Montana has one of the highest self-reported rates of driving after drinking too much—nearly twice the national average. As a result, Montana has one of the highest rates of young adults killed in crashes that involve alcohol-intoxicated drivers.

Drinking and driving is a persistent problem in the state of Montana. But why? To learn more about this issue, we listened to young adults aged 18-25 across Montana. Their thoughts and opinions are described inside.

AFTER SOCIAL EVENTS

Young adults in rural Montana often drive after drinking at social events, including those at friends' houses, restaurants, bars, festivals, brandings, and tailgating. They also drive after drinking during outdoor activities such as hunting, floating, swimming, boating, fishing, skiing, and bonfires. Most outdoor drinking activities occur at remote locations. Because young people want to have a good time together and alcohol is thought to facilitate this good time, often *everyone* drinks during these events—including designated drivers.

When do young people drink and drive?

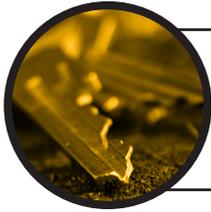
WHEN “BOOZE CRUISING”

Young Montanans also frequently drive in rural areas *while* drinking alcohol with friends (known as booze cruising). Youth believe they are less likely to get caught drinking or to crash while booze cruising because they are driving on back roads and away from patrolling police officers. Although young adults generally view drinking and driving as dangerous behavior, some do not recognize that booze cruising constitutes drinking and driving. This belief is potentially reinforced when young adults watch friends and family members routinely drinking while driving around to perform daily activities or errands (also known as “grabbing a few roadies”).

WHEN THEY HAVE “NOTHING TO DO”

One of the primary reasons young people drink and drive is that they are bored and want something to do. Specifically, young adults will spin their car, race their car, go spotlighting, and drive snowmobiles, dirt bikes, and four-wheelers—all while intoxicated. When bored, young people drink alcohol and sometimes drive around looking for something fun to do. Even when alternative activities are available, such as movies, social gatherings, or outdoor activities, young people do not necessarily see these as *alternatives* to drinking but instead may incorporate alcohol into these activities.

Why do young people drink and drive?



The Culture of Drinking & Driving in Montana

Alcohol is a central part of many social interactions, and often young people (including minors) consider alcohol consumption to be necessary to be part of the “cool” crowd. Furthermore, being perceived as able to “handle your alcohol” (i.e., drink substantial amounts of alcohol without being visibly drunk) is viewed positively. Sometimes young people are overconfident about their ability to drive after drinking alcohol and think they are “good drunk drivers.” In addition, young adults worry about being called a “light-weight” (a person who gets drunk from small amounts of alcohol). Thus, a sense of pride can lead to drinking and driving. Requesting a ride can be viewed as embarrassing or shameful because it indicates that the person is too intoxicated to drive home.

Drinking alcohol and driving are entrenched in rural Montana culture. Cars and trucks are status symbols and sources of pride. Young people “drive everywhere,” and there is a perception that *everyone* drinks alcohol, including designated drivers. Young adults note that drinking and driving is just “how it is” in rural Montana, but it is viewed as less acceptable in towns or cities. In rural Montana, a “work hard, play hard” lifestyle is pervasive, and alcohol is often the reward for the hard work.

Pride & Overconfidence



Young adults sometimes feel pressured by their friends to drink alcohol. Friends buy drinks for each other to encourage greater alcohol consumption. After drinking, sometimes the “least drunk” person gets compelled to drive, even if that person feels heavily intoxicated.



Pressure from Friends

In many small rural towns, there is no public transportation available. Some larger towns have a few alternative transportation options, such as taxis, but sometimes young adults are skeptical about these options because of cost, a fear of riding with strangers, or not wanting others to know that they feel too drunk to drive.

Lack of Alternative Transportation



Driving after drinking is often viewed as a necessary evil to return home. For example, young adults often need their car the next morning for school or work, and they feel more comfortable in their own home, sleeping in their own bed, and waking up to their own food and shower. Underage drinkers sometimes drive home after drinking to avoid being caught by their parents and to get home in time for curfew. These minors may refuse to spend the night or find a different way home because they don't want their parents to know they were drunk.



They Want to Get Home

Why do some young people choose not to drink and drive?



FEAR OF HARMING OTHERS

The risk of causing serious harm to another person is one of the main reasons why young adults do not drink and drive. Concerns about the welfare of others have various sources. Some young people say that their upbringing or morals cause them to think about the well-being of other drivers on the road. Other young people describe community tragedies or personal experiences that cause them to fear drunk driving. Similarly, young people do not want to hurt *themselves* and therefore avoid drunk driving.

LEGAL AND FINANCIAL REASONS

A fear of legal consequences is a signifi-

cant deterrent to drunk driving. This fear is heightened in locations with greater police presence and enforcement. Young people also recognize that DUIs are expensive and that a crash can require replacing a vehicle and other damaged property. Furthermore, young people see how a DUI citation could get in the way of their life goals. For instance, getting a DUI citation could result in job loss and interfere with higher education plans.

REPUTATION

Some young people worry that a DUI citation could ruin their status in the community. Young adults do not want to be viewed as troublemakers, and many fear that drunk

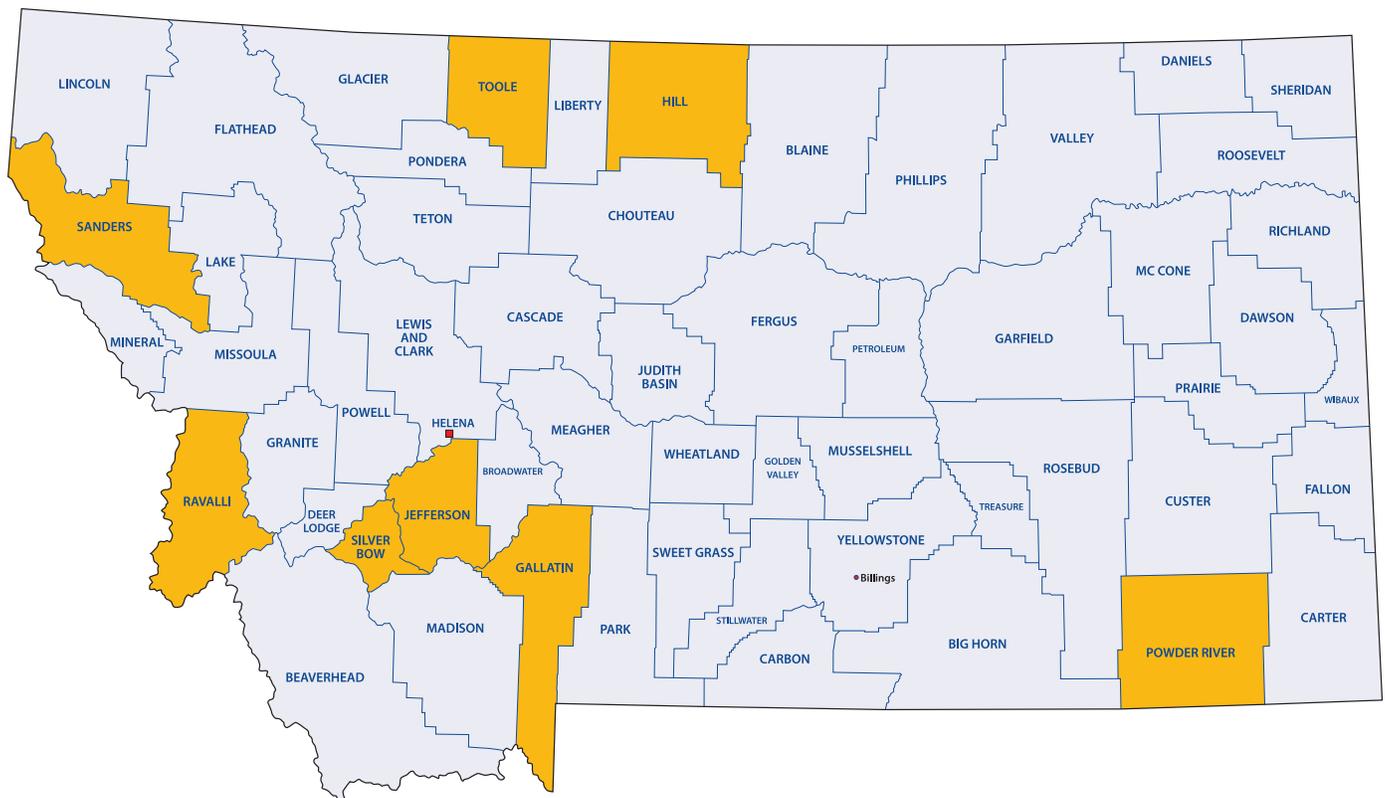
driving could destroy their reputation. This concern is particularly apparent in small, tightly knit communities where news of a DUI spreads quickly. On a family level, the potential for disappointing one's parents following a DUI arrest also keeps young adults from driving after drinking.

PEER PRESSURE

Young people often pressure their friends to avoid driving if they have been drinking. Sometimes a friend will actively prevent another person from driving after drinking by taking the person's keys.

Are rural areas unique?

Young adults think that drinking and driving is different in rural areas than in more populated areas. They believe that harming someone else in a rural area is less likely because there are fewer drivers on the road. Some rural young adults think that this makes the behavior more excusable in rural areas. Getting in trouble with the law is also considered less likely in rural areas where there are few police officers. Furthermore, in some locations, police have a reputation for being “soft” on driving after drinking and for not citing drunk drivers.



MAP OF MONTANA WITH COUNTIES INVOLVED IN THIS STUDY HIGHLIGHTED

Reflections

These findings provide insight on potential community programs and strategies that could be used to deter drinking and driving.

What is currently working?

- **MOST YOUNG PEOPLE KNOW THAT DRIVING AFTER DRINKING IS DANGEROUS. THEY FREQUENTLY HEAR THIS INFORMATION FROM THEIR PARENTS, AS WELL AS FROM TEACHERS AND LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS.**
- **YOUNG ADULTS AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS LOOK OUT FOR EACH OTHER. IF THEY DECIDE TO DRINK, THEY FREQUENTLY PLAN AHEAD, DESIGNATE A SOBER DRIVER, OR SPEND THE NIGHT AT A FRIEND'S HOUSE IF THEY CANNOT DRIVE HOME SAFELY.**
- **YOUNG ADULTS IN TOWNS WITH PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION FREQUENTLY USE BUSES TO AVOID DRIVING DRUNK.**

What can be done?

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES

- Offer free or low-cost alternative transportation options.
- Increase sobriety checkpoints at places where young people frequently drink before driving (e.g., bars, festivals, and other public events).
- Publicize the use of checkpoints to increase the perceived likelihood of being detected.

ADDRESS MONTANA'S EXCESSIVE DRINKING CULTURE

- Increase the number of alcohol-free activities to provide alternative entertainment, thereby reducing the urge to drink

out of boredom.

- Encourage adults of all ages to find rewards or coping strategies other than alcohol if they have a hard day at work.
- Work to change opinions about excessive alcohol consumption as a source of pride.
- Devise strategies so that designated drivers—and other non-drinkers—can be socially included without being pressured to drink.

ADDRESS THE CULTURE OF DRINKING AND DRIVING IN RURAL AREAS

- Warn parents that driving with “a few roadies” in front of their children can suggest

that drinking and driving is acceptable.

- Create campaigns that target unique aspects of rural areas. These campaigns may emphasize that:
 - Booze cruising on back roads is still drinking and driving, even if the chances of getting caught are slim.
 - Drinking and driving in rural areas is especially dangerous. An intoxicated driver that crashes is more likely to die because it could take a long time for anyone to find the vehicle and get the injured driver to a hospital.

How do young adults view driving after marijuana use compared to alcohol?

EDUCATION IS NEEDED

When it comes to driving under the influence of marijuana, many young adults admit that they do not know much about the topic. Teachers and parents educate children and adolescents about the dangers of drunk driving, but not the dangers of driving while high. Young adults express uncertainty about the legality of driving after marijuana use, and they are divided about the validity of impairment tests. Consequently, some young adults in Montana think that the risk of get-

ting caught for driving under the influence of marijuana is relatively low. Therefore, some designated drivers use marijuana rather than alcohol to avoid legal consequences.

MARIJUANA IS PERCEIVED AS LESS DANGEROUS

Numerous studies show that using marijuana by itself or in combination with other substances (including alcohol) inhibits one's ability to drive safely. Many young adults think that driving after using marijuana is

much less dangerous than driving after alcohol use. Some young people believe that the strain and potency of the marijuana determine the drug's impact on driving ability. Although most young adults assume that marijuana impairs driving ability, others think that it could improve driving ability if a person has developed a tolerance to the drug or if he or she compensates by driving carefully. The fact that marijuana use increases the riskiness of driving should be clearly communicated to young adults.

Study Methods

The information presented in this report is based on a series of discussions with young adults in rural areas of Montana. To learn about young people's opinions, Dr. Kaylin Greene conducted 11 focus groups with young adults (aged 18-25) in eight Montana counties during 2015-16. A total of 72 young adults participated. These young people were asked questions about their perceptions of "young adults their age." These discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed. Then a group of researchers read the transcripts and documented reoccurring ideas and themes.

NATIONAL HIGHWAY TRAFFIC SAFETY ADMINISTRATION (NHTSA)

- Compton & Berning. 2015. Traffic Safety Facts Research Note: drugs and alcohol crash risk. http://www.nhtsa.gov/staticfiles/nti/pdf/812117-Drug_and_Alcohol_Crash_Risk.pdf.
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Additional Resources

CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION (CDC)

- Impaired Driving: Get the Facts. https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/impaired_driving/impaired-drv_factsheet.html
- Sobering Facts: Drunk Driving in MT. https://www.cdc.gov/motorvehiclesafety/pdf/impaired_driving/drunk_driving_in_mt.pdf
- The Community Guide. Motor Vehicle Injury. <https://www.thecommunityguide.org/topic/motor-vehicle-injury>

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