

TITLE: Drugs and Traffic Safety: Is There a Nexus?

DATE: March 1990

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REPORT NUMBER: Unnumbered (NRN79)

NTIS NUMBER: None

FUNDING SOURCE: Departmental Budget

PROTECT OBJECTIVE:

To examine the evidence for a connection, causal or otherwise, between drug use and accidents.

SUMMARY:

Evidence from the epidemiological and experimental literature is reviewed in this paper. This evidence was conflicting, although it is noted that a probable causal nexus can be inferred in the case of some drugs taken under some conditions. The paper points out that, in marked contrast to the BAC as an indicator of alcohol impairment, no widely accepted blood levels then existed at which an individual could be said to be under the influence of drugs other than alcohol. Moreover, no general dose-response relationships between the amounts of various drugs ingested, singly or in combination, and the degree of driving impairment had been discovered. The paper concludes that it would be premature to set and attempt to enforce quantitative blood or urine levels as indicators of drug-related impairment; such impairment could probably better be detected through behavioral testing at the point of arrest. The recommendation is made that any expansion of departmental activity relating to drug use be justifiable on the basis of sound empirical evidence. Such evidence might be developed in the future, the author noted, but the evidence existing at that time did not constitute a sufficiently firm foundation to justify use of extraordinary methods. The paper also recommends that if a decision were to be made to adopt extraordinary methods such as chemical testing of license applicants, the Department should conduct a large-scale study to determine whether people convicted of drug offenses represent increased safety risks as drivers. While this would not show a causal impact of drugs on accidents, it might at least establish a more definitive associational nexus. The opinion is expressed that, if convicted offenders were found to have an increased accident risk in such a study, it would seem incumbent on the department to subject them to mandatory license suspension, given that a decision had been made to deny licensure to applicants solely on the basis of a positive chemical test. (It should be noted here that under the law at the date of writing, CVC §13202.5, license suspension in the case of drug convictees is only mandatory if the offender was under 21 at the time of the offense; then it occurs only if the court chooses to report the information to DMV.)

IMPLEMENTATION STATUS OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

The recommended study was approved by the DMV Director, and was underway as of late 1991. This study, "The Relationship Between Drug Arrests and Driving Risk" by Leonard Marowitz (Report #142), was published in 1994.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Administration of the State of California considered introducing legislation to mandate urine-screening of young original license applicants for drug metabolites. Applicants showing a positive test result would be subject to suspension of the driving privilege and delay of license issuance for at least one year. However, this idea was not pursued.

A federal law (PL 101-516) requires states to suspend or revoke the driving privilege of all convicted drug offenders or lose monies that would otherwise be apportioned to them. California law was amended on two occasions (though with sunset dates) to conform with federal requirements. In response to federal objections to the temporary nature of California's compliance, the California Highway Patrol has proposed (in 1996) that the most recent sunset date be removed.