Drugs and Driving: Challenges for Research and Practice

Kathryn Stewart, President
International Council on Alcohol, Drugs and Traffic Safety
*International Conference on Urban Traffic Safety*
August 2017
Drugs and Driving: Where are we?
Drugs and Driving: Where are we?

- Drugged driving will always be more complicated and challenging.

- Science of drug-impaired driving is much less advanced than for alcohol impaired driving.

- Impairment is more difficult to measure and track.

- Illegal and medicinal drugs are numerous and constantly evolving.

- Combinations of drugs/drugs and alcohol have different effects.

- Measurement of presence of drugs more difficult, time-consuming and expensive.
Concerns about drugged driving are growing.

Laws relating to marijuana are changing rapidly.

Countries (and U.S. states) are responding with traffic safety laws related to drugs.

Traffic safety and enforcement organizations need to take action.
How can we deal with the changing picture with evidence based approaches?

- Understanding of the current situation
- Ability to monitor changes
- Capacity for evaluating effects of policies and programs
What do we need?

DATA!
Data

- Prevalence of key drugs in traffic.
- Prevalence of key drugs in crash-involved drivers.
- Crash risk estimates for key drugs and combinations.
- Impact of policies and procedures on prevalence, arrest rates, individual outcomes, and traffic safety.
What do we have?

**U.S. Fatal Analysis Reporting System (FARS)**

- No consistent policy between, or even within, States for drug testing.

- Variation regarding who is tested; which drug is tested for; type of test, cut-off levels, and equipment; and whether blood, urine, or oral fluid is used.
Some jurisdictions test only fatally injured drivers; others test all drivers involved in fatal crashes.

Some jurisdictions test no one at all.

A driver is more likely to be tested for drugs if there is information from the crash indicating that drugs may have been a factor.
Currently the information in FARS is insufficient to allow comparisons of drug use across years, or across States.

It is not possible to make inferences about impairment, crash causation, or comparisons to alcohol from this limited data.

Other data needs...

- Arrest rates
- Outcomes of adjudication
- Outcomes of interventions: penalties and programs
Many state laws don’t distinguish between alcohol and drug related offenses

Drivers over the alcohol limit often not tested for drugs

Very difficult to monitor trends or the impact of policies and programs
What can we do?

- Improve data collection at the state and national level
- Continue to carry out crash studies, program evaluations, policy monitoring on a smaller scale.
Conclusions

- Drug use in traffic is changing rapidly.

- Drugs are inherently more complicated and difficult to deal with.

- Laws, policies and programs will continue to change – with or without an evidence base.

- Improved data collection and availability can help jurisdictions establish a better legal framework, better prevention programs, better enforcement, and better programs for offenders.