

Study Finds More Drivers Testing Positive for Prescription Drugs, Marijuana and Multiple Drugs

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The profile of a drugged driver has changed substantially since 1993, according to a new study released this week in the journal *Public Health Reports*, which shows that more drivers are now testing positive for prescription drugs, marijuana and multiple drugs.

“While we’ve seen a decrease over the years in motor vehicle fatalities involving people under the influence, the nature of those crashes is changing,” said study author Fernando Wilson, PhD, an associate professor at the University of Nebraska Medical Center.

The study examines trends in the characteristics of U.S. drivers who were involved in fatal crashes between 1993 and 2010 and tested positive for drugs. The study, funded by the Public Health Law Research program of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, was set up to investigate the relationship between state laws and the consumption of alcohol and other drugs in fatal car crashes. It found that the percentage of drugged drivers with three or more drugs in their system nearly doubled from 1993 to 2010, increasing from 11.5 percent to 21.5 percent.

“In 1993, about one in eight drivers were using multiple drugs concurrently. By 2010, it was closer to one in five. That’s a large increase in drug use,” Wilson said. “Beyond that, we’re also seeing more and more people using drugs and alcohol together. About 70 percent of drivers who tested positive for cocaine had also been consuming alcohol, and almost 55 percent of drivers who tested positive for cannabis also had alcohol in their systems.”

Additional findings:

- Almost 60 percent of cannabis-only users were younger than 30 years.
- Thirty-nine percent of prescription drug users were 50 years old or older.

“These trends are likely to continue into the future given the aging U.S. population, an increasing reliance on prescription medications by medical providers and increasing initiatives to legalize marijuana,” said Wilson. “However, it is unclear whether current state policies are completely up to the challenge of addressing the growing issue of drugged driving.”