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# The Problem-Drinker Driver Project

Research  
Note  
89-5

New York State Division of Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse

Marguerite T. Saunders, Director

## Indicators of Problem Drinker-Drivers and DWI Recidivism Among the Young and Reckless

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**W**hile the drinking-driver is a concern regardless of age, there are special considerations for the youthful drinking-driver. Individuals 25 years old or younger are relatively inexperienced with driving and since there is a tendency for younger drivers to engage in high risk behaviors, the probability for accidents

among this group is elevated. Adding alcohol to this equation may increase the risk of an accident tremendously. The detection of problem-drinker drivers early in their development of alcohol problems would help reduce the impact on the public. If the problem-drinker driver in the 25 and under age group could be

successfully identified early on, it could lead to effective intervention measures.

This research note focuses on characteristics that separate young DWI problem drinker-drivers from their older counterparts and that distinguish young repeat offenders from young first-time offenders. The sample consists of 461 drivers referred to the Drinking Driver Evaluation and Treatment Program (DDETP) in Erie County between 1983 and 1985. DWI arrestees were assigned to the DDETP on the basis of criteria such as a high Blood-Alcohol concentration (BAC) at the time of the arrest, high scores on the Michigan Alcohol Screening Test (MAST), or a prior DWI arrest. (See Problem Drinking-Driver Research Note 89-2 for a more thorough description of the sample.)

**Table 1**

### Characteristics of Young vs. Older Problem Drinker-Drivers

	Age Group (in years)		
	16-25 (n=134)	26-35 (n=163)	36 + (n=164)
<b>Demographics:</b>			
Males	90%	95%	92%
Whites	96%	96%	78% ***
Less than H.S.	18%	14%	32% **
Unemployed	37%	31% **	43%
White Collar Jobs	11%	18%	26% ***
<b>Criminal History:</b>			
Repeat DWI Offenders	52%	71% ***	73% ***
Other Alcohol Related Arrests in Last 6 Months	11%	14%	9%
Other Non-alcohol Arrests	18%	23%	18%
<b>Alcohol Related Variables:</b>			
Drinks of Alcohol/Drinking Day for 30 Days Prior to DWI Arrest	6.18	5.72	5.06 **
Drinks of Alcohol Before DWI	10.98	11.07	10.22
Alcohol Dependence or Abuse (DSM-III-R)	90%	99%	100%
Prior Alcoholism Treatment	17%	15%	18%

### Characteristics of Young vs. Older Problem-Drinker Drivers

The overall sample was divided into three age groups - 25 or younger (n=134), 26 through 35 (n=163), and 36 or older (n=164). Table 1 shows demographic, criminal history and alcohol-related characteristics of each age group. In comparison to the 36 and older age group, the youngest group had significantly greater numbers of Whites, fewer individuals who didn't graduate from high school, and fewer white collar workers. While the youngest age group had a slightly lower rate of unemployment than

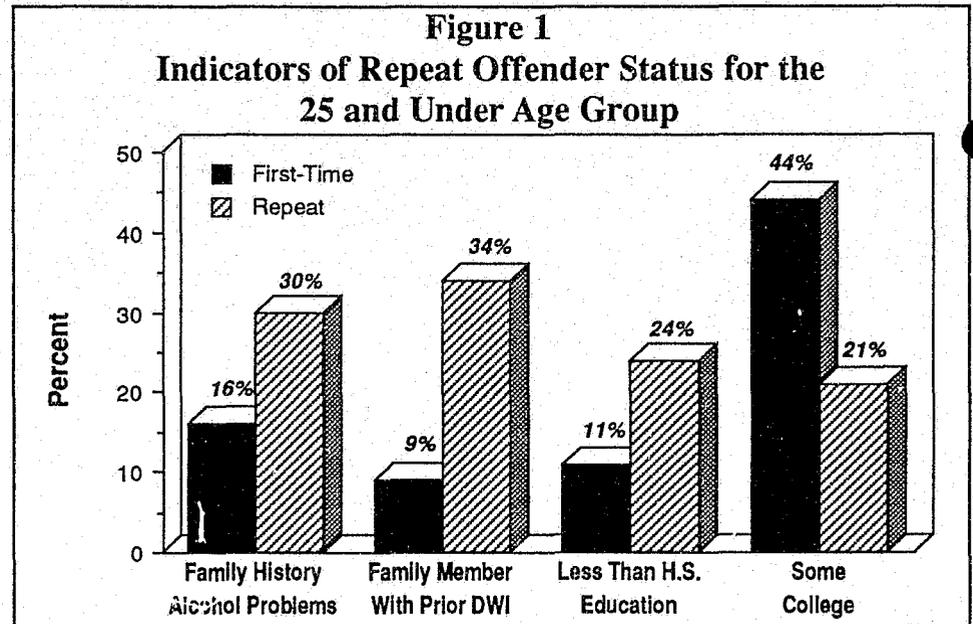
Asterisks indicate a significant difference exists between that group and the youngest age group -  
\*\* p < .05, \*\*\* p < .01

the oldest age group, they had a significantly higher rate of unemployment than the middle age group. The U-shaped trend for the unemployment rate reflects the fact that some of the youngest age group were still in college and living at home, while some of the oldest age group had already retired.

For the criminal history category, the youngest age group had significantly fewer repeat DWI offenders than both of the older age groups. This finding reveals that younger individuals had fewer years to develop a problem and to be identified. Surprisingly, the percentage of individuals arrested for other types of crimes, whether alcohol-related or not, were similar across all three age groups. As noted previously (see Problem Drinker-Driver Research Note 89-2), within the DWI population there is a subgroup of individuals with a criminal history, and apparently, the percent of individuals within this criminal history subgroup remains constant across age groups.

The youngest age group consumed a significantly higher number of drinks per drinking session in the 30 days prior to the DWI arrest than the oldest group. This may indicate that for young DWI problem drinkers, a heavier consumption drinking period precedes the arrest incident. The number of drinks consumed immediately preceding the current DWI arrest was similar across all three groups suggesting that regardless of usual drinking habits, there appears to be some threshold (around 10 drinks) which puts one at greater risk for arrest. Also, the number of drinks on the night of the arrest reflects the fact that all individuals, regardless of their age, reported drinking heavier than usual. It should be pointed out that these are self reports of alcohol consumption and thus the actual consumption may have been higher or lower.

Using the DSM-III-R criteria for diagnosis of alcoholism, all three age groups show equally high rates of alcohol abuse or alcohol dependence. Likewise,



the percentage of individuals receiving treatment was equivalent for all three age groups. The important point from these findings is the low rate of previous treatment. The rates of alcohol diagnosis of 90% or better, and the fact only 15-18% received previous treatment, suggests that better methods of channeling individuals into treatment modalities may be necessary.

### Distinguishing Between Young Repeat and First-Time DWI Offenders

Figure 1 shows the variables found to significantly discriminate young repeat DWI offenders from young first-time DWI offenders. Young repeat offenders were almost twice as likely as young first-time offenders to have a family member with alcohol problems. A similar trend existed for having a family member with a DWI. Again, the young repeat offenders were more likely to have a relative with a DWI than the young first-time offenders. Education also showed differences for the young repeat and young first-time offenders. First-time offenders were over twice as likely as repeat offenders to have some college education, while the repeat offenders were twice as likely as the first-time offenders to have less than a high school education. For the other age groups there were no differences between repeat

and first time offenders on any of these variables.

Although the findings suggest that variables exist which can help to identify young problem-drinker drivers and recidivists among the young problem-drinker drivers, they must be viewed cautiously. While family history and education appear to be of particular use in categorizing recidivists for the youngest group, reserve needs to be exercised when considering these factors. The fact that some of the first-time offenders also responded affirmatively to the family history items and dropped out of high school prior to graduation, indicates the limitations of these items. However, in spite of the limitations, family history may still be useful for selecting out persons 25 and under for further evaluation. Subsequent work is being completed to help identify other important variables. Identification of these variables along with family history and education could lead to more effective evaluation processes for detecting the problem-drinker driver among the 25 and under age group. Once identified, these individuals could then be sent to appropriate treatment modalities. This would help attenuate the cost associated with continued alcohol abuse, including accidents and traffic fatalities due to the drunken driver.

<sup>1</sup>All questions regarding this research note (released 8/89) should be directed to Thomas H. Nochajski, Research Institute on Alcoholism, 1021 Main St., Buffalo, New York 14203