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Video Short

Least Drunk Driver

By CWK Network Producer

"A lot of times, teenagers think that if you only have a couple of beers, a couple of drinks, you're fine to drive. In fact, you're just as impaired as somebody who's drunk. You just think you're not impaired, and that's part of the problem here."

– Len Pagano, Safe America Foundation

In theory, a designated driver is supposed to be someone chosen *before* the party begins – someone who doesn't drink at all. But according to recent surveys, many teens believe it's the "least drunk" driver who should get the car keys.

Just ask teenagers how they chose a designated driver.

"Whoever volunteers, I guess," says 16-year-old Ryan.

"[There is a] 25 to 50 percent chance that that person's going to end up drinking anyways," says Garrett, 16.

"At a party, I mean, everyone else gets ridiculous," explains Melissa, 17. "And there's one person [who says], 'Well, I've only had four shots. I haven't had a bunch.' [And other teenagers say], 'Okay, you're good. Drive us home.'"

According to a new Canadian study, the first problem is 20 percent of teens start drinking and *then* choose a designated driver. Also, according to the Centers for Disease Control, 30 percent of teens pick a driver who has been drinking.

"Part of the problem is that we don't really get across the correct notion of what it means to be a designated driver," says Len Pagano, president and CEO of the Safe America Foundation. "It doesn't mean to be the one with the least amount of alcohol in your system."

Dan Ruede, 19, has scars on his face today because he was riding with a designated driver who had been drinking. He figured since the party was so close to his house, he'd be alright.

"It was a very short ride," he explains, "a two-minute ride at the most."

"They were drinking," says his father, Robert. "They weren't thinking, and I guess what happened is the kid hit the gas instead of the brake and they hit the tree."

Experts say parents should have their kids explain exactly when and how they choose a designated driver.

"And just kind of get an understanding from your teen's perspective of what [he/she thinks] is acceptable," adds Pagano. "Then you can deal with the reality of teaching them."

He says to remind them that any amount of alcohol can impair a driver and dramatically increase the chance they will be arrested, injured or even killed.

"Try to get them to understand that you don't want to make a night of supposed fun into a night of tragedy," he says.

What Parents Need to Know

A designated driver is simply a person who agrees to abstain from alcohol and be responsible for driving others home. Clearly this concept, which applies to adult drinkers of legal age as well, has saved thousands of lives and spared many more thousands from suffering injury from drunk driving.

The combination of teens, alcohol and driving presents an especially threatening and illegal mix. Teens tend to be relatively inexperienced drivers, relatively inexperienced consumers of alcohol, and tend to have a false sense of invincibility and immortality.

Despite the fact that drinking before age 21 is an illegal act, 20 percent of all alcohol consumed in the United States is attributed to people between the ages of 12 and 20. Alcohol is the number one drug of choice among persons under the age of 21 in the United States. Consider these statistics from the 2008 National Survey on Drug Use and Health conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

- 50 percent of high school teenagers drink some alcohol
- 10 percent of high school teenagers have driven after drinking alcohol
- 33 percent have ridden with a driver who had been drinking alcohol
- Everyday, approximately three teens die from drinking and driving accidents.
- An estimated 12.4 percent of persons aged 12 or older drove under the influence of alcohol at least once in the past year. The 2008 estimate corresponds to 30.9 million persons.

- Among persons aged 12 or older, males were more likely than females (16.0 vs. 9.0 percent) to drive under the influence of alcohol in the past year.

According to statistics from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, twenty-eight percent (28%) of 15- to 20-year-old drivers who were killed in motor vehicle crashes in 2005 had been drinking and for young drivers, (15-20 years old), alcohol involvement is higher among males than among females. In 2005, 24% of the young male drivers involved in fatal crashes had been drinking at the time of the crash, compared with 12% of the young female drivers involved in fatal crashes.

The National Research Council and Institute of Medicine urges communities to develop and support alcohol awareness programs, enforce minimum drinking ages laws in drinking establishments as well as private homes and develop ways to curtail the easy access and widespread appeal of alcohol to young people. Parents can consider the following strategies:

- Create enforceable consequences for your teen if he/she rides with someone who's been drinking, such as taking away the keys for 30 days.
- Be a good role model as a parent. Never drive your car if you've had "only" a couple of drinks
- As they get older, teens will tend to take more chances, so parents need to reinforce the message that it's never okay to ride with anyone who's been drinking.

Resources

[National Highway Safety Traffic Administration](#)
[Alcohol, Drivers and Solutions](#)
[National Academics](#)
[Safe America Foundation](#)
[Students Against Drunk Driving](#)

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