

H-218

NATIONAL TRANSPORTATION SAFETY BOARD
WASHINGTON, D.C.

ISSUED: April 21, 1980

Forwarded to:

Honorable Richard L. Thornburgh
Governor of Pennsylvania
255 Main Capitol
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17120

SAFETY RECOMMENDATION(S)

H-80-27

About 3 a.m., e.d.t., on September 22, 1979, a Chevrolet sedan, occupied only by its driver, was westbound on U.S. Route 422 near Indiana, Pennsylvania. While negotiating a right curve at a high rate of speed, it collided head-on in the eastbound lane with an eastbound Ford Bronco occupied by six persons. Shortly after the crash the Ford caught fire. All persons in both vehicles were killed. 1/

A toxicological examination revealed the presence of alcohol in the blood of both drivers. The blood alcohol level (BAL) of the Chevrolet driver was 0.21 percent, and the BAL of the Ford driver was 0.24 percent. The toxicologist noted that these concentrations indicate "markedly impaired judgment, skill, and reaction time at the time of death." The State of Pennsylvania provides that a BAL of 0.10 percent or more constitutes a presumption that a person is under the influence of intoxicating liquor.

Pennsylvania had a steady increase in traffic fatalities from 1976 through 1979. The fatality rate increased from 2.9 to 3.1 per hundred million vehicle miles traveled, and the mileage traveled also increased annually. Data from the Fatal Accident Reporting System (FARS) of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) indicate that while the number of all drivers killed annually in Pennsylvania rose about 8 percent from 1976 through 1978, the number killed who had been drinking rose 66 percent over the same period. The 1978 "driving while intoxicated (DWI)" fatality figure is 4 percent higher than the national average of 36 percent. During this same time State Police DWI arrests showed an annual decrease. In 1976 there were 2,674 arrests; in 1977, 2,306 arrests; and in 1978 there were 2,204 arrests. (See table 1.)

1/ For more detailed information, read "Highway Accident Report--Two-Vehicle Collision and Fire, U.S. Route 422, Indiana, Pennsylvania, September 22, 1979" (NTSB-HAR-80-3).

Table 1.—Highway Fatalities Versus DWI Fatalities and DWI Arrests

	<u>1976</u>	<u>1977</u>	<u>1978</u>	<u>1979</u>
Fatal accidents	2,025	2,071	2,136	2,204 (est.)
Fatality rate	2.9	2.9	3.0	3.1 (est.)
Drivers killed in fatal accidents	1,076	1,125	1,160	not available
Drivers under influence of alcohol (.10 percent or more)	324	395	459	not available
DWI fatalities increase	30%	35%	40%	
Mileage traveled	69,435M	72,269M	72,709M	not available
DWI arrests	2,674	2,306	2,204	not available

Alcohol-related traffic convictions were not used as a measure of enforcement. There are many variables that affect this statistic. For example, in the case of drivers arrested for DWI but who qualify for and successfully complete a rehabilitation program, the charges are dismissed by the court and expunged from the record. Also plea-bargaining results in convictions of a lesser charge in many cases. Arrests are the basis for the entire system. ^{2/} They identify violators and bring them to the attention of the adjudication and rehabilitation programs.

The Pennsylvania Highway Safety Plan for fiscal year 1980 has several planned alcohol safety projects which include: (1) training sessions for the judiciary and for law enforcement agencies; (2) expansion and standardization of a data reporting system relative to driving while under the influence (DWI); (3) acquisition and use of improved alcohol breath-testing equipment with associated operator certification and maintenance training for State and municipal police; (4) expansion of alcohol safety programs to seven counties where no programs exist; (5) development of interstate agreements relative to handling out-of-State DWI offenders; and (6) development of an evaluation project that will measure the effectiveness of the State's Alcohol Safety Project.

However, as long as there continues to be an increase in alcohol-related fatal accidents, alcohol safety programs are not as effective as they are designed to be. Consistent selective enforcement programs provide a deterrent to potential from the driving public and exposing them to the remainder of the alcohol safety program elements. Past experience has demonstrated that sound enforcement efforts are the threshold for successful alcohol safety programs. ^{3/}

The Safety Board concludes that an increase in enforcement activity in the State directed toward persons who drive while under the influence of alcohol should be included in proposed programs to reduce alcohol-related traffic accidents, injuries, and deaths.

^{2/} Summary of National Alcohol Safety Action Projects, U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, p. 14.

^{3/} Ibid.

Therefore, the National Transportation Safety Board recommends that the State of Pennsylvania:

Provide increased emphasis on your Statewide enforcement program directed toward reducing the number of persons driving on public roads while under the influence of alcohol. (Class I, Urgent Action) (H-80-27)

KING, Chairman, DRIVER, Vice Chairman, McADAMS and BURSLEY, Members, concurred in this recommendation. GOLDMAN, Member, did not concur.


By: James B. King
Chairman

