

Media ignores health consequences of drinking and driving among young celebrities

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The recent drinking and driving (DUI) arrests of celebrities—Paris Hilton, Nicole Ritchie, Michelle Rodriguez and Lindsay Lohan—yielded widespread news coverage, however, very little of it offered any public health context, according to a new report by researchers from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health's Center for Injury Research and Policy.

Analyzing stories reported by the New York Times, TIME, People and the evening news broadcasts from ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN and Fox, researchers found that only 4 percent of the reports made any mention of injury or potential injury from the DUI events. In 2005, alcohol-related crashes resulted in 16,885 deaths in the U.S. The results of the study will be published in the May 2009 issue of *Alcohol & Alcoholism* and is available on the journal's website in advance of the print publication.

"Media are an important source of information about the consequences of [alcohol](#) consumption, and influence how individuals define acceptable behavior," said Katherine Smith, PhD, lead author of the study and assistant professor with the Bloomberg School's Center for Injury Research and Policy. "While the celebrity DUI stories raised awareness of the issue of drinking and driving among [young people](#), an opportunity to educate this audience on solutions to prevent DUI was missed." Previous research has demonstrated that medical-related celebrity news, such as reports of breast cancer, can motivate the public to seek cancer screening services like mammography.

Smith, along with colleagues Denise Twum and Andrea Gielen, conducted a qualitative analysis of 150 print and 16 television news stories using a coding framework to capture main elements of relevant story content, e.g., placement of any mention of the DUI incident, mention of contributing factors or consequences of DUI, as well as any public health messages. The most frequently occurring topics found in the study sample were arrest, sentencing and going to/release from jail. Less than half of the stories focused on the legal aspects of the DUI event. Few articles included any consideration of any DUI-related policy or possible societal intervention, and discussions of the consequences of the DUI were almost entirely limited to discussions of the legal and professional repercussions for the celebrity herself, such as losing movie or television roles. Examining who is most often called upon to offer comment, researchers found that those involved in the justice process (police, district attorney, judge) were frequently quoted, whereas no story included quotes from public health stakeholders or DUI advocacy groups. Only one story suggested the possibility of a designated driver.

"This is really a missed opportunity. The fact that reported rates of driving impaired are higher among young adult drinkers and that drinking and driving in this age group is increasing suggests we need to be taking advantage of every opportunity we have to change behaviors and perceptions among this audience," said Andrea Gielen, ScD, a co-author of the study and director of the Center for Injury Research and Policy. "Unfortunately, when media cover paltry legal consequences for the celebrities alongside routine use of their glamorous photos, we are likely doing a disservice to young people. We need to be getting the message to young people that drinking and driving is a serious issue with substantial legal and life-threatening consequences."

Source: Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of [Public Health](#) ([news](#) : [web](#))

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