

# More prime-time ads could kick drunken driving to the curb

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Drunken driving has taken a back seat in recent years to other public health concerns, such as texting while behind the wheel and other kinds of impaired driving, according to Cornell researchers.

But drunken driving has not run out of gas.

More than 10,000 people die each year from alcohol-related accidents. And drunken driving is a leading killer of young people, the researchers say.

Public service announcements about the dangers of drunken driving could change that – but only if more people see those ads, according to a new Cornell study.

For example, just by doubling the number of announcements on prime-time television, a city of 1 million would have 35 fewer people die per year from drunken driving, the study said.

The research appeared March 18 in *Preventive Medicine*.

"You need frequent and widespread exposure to these kinds of messages for them to influence rates of [fatal accidents](#)," said co-author Jeff Niederdeppe, associate professor of communication in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

"The only PSAs we're really seeing have a big impact are those airing in

prime time, which of course are the most expensive. Because these campaigns usually rely on time donated by the networks, they're not airing very often in prime time, and their potential impact is likely much higher than their actual impact has been," he added.

The study is among the first large-scale study to assess the effectiveness of alcohol-control public service announcements in reducing drunken-driving rates. Niederdeppe co-wrote the paper with Rosemary Avery, chair and professor of policy analysis and management in the College of Human Ecology, and Emily Miller '16, a research assistant at Child Trends, a nonprofit that does research on children, youth and their families.

Their study also found that anti-alcohol abuse PSAs, which make up nearly 30 percent of all alcohol-related announcements, had no impact whatsoever on fatal crashes.

"This suggests targeting these messages to the behavior at hand seems to matter," Niederdeppe said.

The team analyzed data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting Systems, a federal database of accidents involving at least one fatality caused by a drunk driver. They compared that data to a national census of all alcohol-control PSAs over a 15-year period, January 1996 through December 2010. They also controlled for state laws and policies aimed at reducing drunken driving.

The researchers found the average media market aired only seven alcohol-related PSAs in prime time per month. "That doesn't mean everyone has seen it seven times; it means it has aired in a media market seven times, across all media stations, across all different channels. So the actual number of views is low," Niederdeppe said.

Overall, the number of anti-drunken driving PSAs had very small effects on fatalities, the study found.

But prime-time PSAs told a different story.

A 100 percent increase in the volume of PSAs airing in prime time in the previous month was associated with .0857 fewer drunken-driving fatal accidents per month per 100,000 people. Furthermore, these effects persisted for several months, suggesting that their effect accumulates over time. For a city of 1 million, that translates to a little over 35 fatal accidents averted each year, "a much larger and more meaningful result," Niederdeppe said.

That increased effectiveness is thanks in part to the "stickiness" of prime-time PSAs, he said. The positive effect of the [prime-time](#) ads lasted longer than announcements run during the day or late at night, the study found.

"Anti-drunken driving PSAs should be planned and designed with the same strategic focus and level of investment committed to commercial advertising campaigns," the study concluded.

While some anti-[drunken driving](#) ads have been funded by paid campaigns, the majority have relied on donated media time. The Federal Communications Commission requires radio and television stations to serve "in the public interest," and many fulfill that obligation by donating airtime to run PSAs.

But there's a glitch. Fewer people are seeing those PSAs.

Viewers are turning away from television in favor of online streaming services like Hulu, Roku and Netflix, which have no "public interest" requirements.

So public health advocates will have to shift as well, toward platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and other social media, Niederdeppe said. On the upside, ads on those platforms cost much less to produce and can target viewers much better than television ads.

"You probably can't rely on donated media time to get that exposure and have a widespread impact," Niederdeppe said "It means we'll have to invest in efforts to educate the public if we care about this issue."

Provided by Cornell University

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