Stricter Laws Can Reduce Drunk Driving

Center for Problem-Oriented Policing

The Center for Problem-Oriented Policing is composed of police practitioners, researchers, and universities who are dedicated to helping police more effectively address specific crime and disorder problems. In the following viewpoint the Center argues that tighter laws can help reduce drunk driving. It makes several suggestions, including raising the drinking age, conducting sobriety checkpoints, imposing stricter punishments for repeat offenders, suspending or revoking licenses, and other steps. The Center concludes that a variety of legal, social, police, and political enforcements are needed to reduce drunk driving.

AS YOU READ, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS:
1. What does the author say is the legal limit of intoxication for adult drivers in the United States?
2. How can prohibiting open alcohol containers in moving vehicles help reduce drunk driving accidents, according to the author?
3. What effect can sobriety checkpoints have on drunk driving, as reported by the author?
Drinking and driving is greatly influenced by contemporary social attitudes towards the practice. And although laws and law enforcement can help change social attitudes, the reverse is much more likely: that is, that changes in social attitudes will lead to stricter laws and law enforcement. The general trend in social attitudes—at least in the United States, Canada, Europe, Scandinavia, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan—has been toward a lessened tolerance for drinking and driving.

There is a broad range of social policy changes that can significantly reduce drunk driving—tax policy, urban planning, roadway design, vehicle safety, alcohol advertising, and emergency medical care, among others. . . .

Reducing the legal limit of per se violations. Most jurisdictions have enacted laws specifying that certain measurable levels of alcohol are per se violations of the law, irrespective of proof that the alcohol actually impaired the ability of the driver to operate the motor vehicle.

Reducing the legal limit of per se intoxication for adult drivers. Most countries and U.S. states set the level of per se intoxication at .08. The legal limits are often even lower for drivers of commercial vehicles. Reducing the legal limit of intoxication and vigorous enforcement of drunk driving laws have been shown to reduce the number of alcohol-related traffic fatalities, especially when combined with administrative license suspensions.

Reducing the legal limit of per se intoxication for repeat offenders. Some jurisdictions set lower per se intoxication levels for persons who have previously been convicted of drunk driving. There is some evidence that this is effective.

Reducing the legal limit of per se violations for underage drivers. Many countries and U.S. states have enacted laws that prohibit underage drivers from having any measurable level of alcohol in their systems (so-called zero tolerance laws). Although zero tolerance laws are usually not strictly enforced, they do appear to have some deterrent effect on young drivers. . . .

Raising the minimum legal drinking age. The legal drinking age in all U.S. states is now 21 years of age and there is evidence that these laws have helped reduce the number of underage drivers who