



# HFSC research: Houston's drunk drivers are mostly white men, young drivers more likely to use drugs

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More than half of drunk drivers in Houston are white men and younger drivers are more likely to drive drugged, according to research conducted by Houston Forensic Science Center toxicologists.

The research is outlined in the attached peer-reviewed article, *Everything is Bigger in Texas: Alcohol-Impaired Driving in Houston (2014-2018)*, published Thursday in the *Journal of Analytical Toxicology*.

The researchers studied data from more than 12,600 blood alcohol samples from DWI cases tested by HFSC. In Houston, of the samples analyzed by HFSC, men made up 77% of the drivers who tested positive for drugs, according to the article.

Alcohol-impaired driving has long been a major cause of traffic fatalities in Texas and in Houston in particular. Texas consistently ranked in the top five nationally for alcohol-related driving fatalities between 2014 and 2018, hitting the second-highest position in 2018. In Houston, 44 percent of all traffic fatalities in 2018 were alcohol related.

"By studying the results of these tests, we are able to spot trends that could help with enforcement as well as with programs designed to address impaired driving," said Dr. Peter Stout, HFSC's CEO and president and one of the study's authors.

“The Houston Police Department has significantly stepped up enforcement of impaired driving in the past five years, leading to an 87 percent increase in requests for HFSC testing. By reviewing the data, we could help HPD tailor enforcement to be more effective,” added Dr. Stout, who is a toxicologist.

The research also revealed the average age of suspected drunk drivers was 36, and 75 percent of them were between the ages of 21 and 44. Only 3 percent of drivers tested for suspected drunk driving were under 21, or not able to legally drink.

In fact, 45 percent of blood samples for drivers under the age of 21 tested negative for alcohol. However, 80 percent of all samples that tested negative for alcohol and then went on to drug analysis tested positive for one or more drugs.

“This tells us younger people are more likely to be driving drugged than other age groups, a possible indicator that trends of impaired driving will change in the future. This is something we should watch closely and research further,” said Corissa Rodgers, a supervisor in HFSC’s toxicology section who is the lead author of the research paper.

And drug positive samples that had no alcohol were equally as likely to be from Black men as from white men. More than half of cases that were positive for drugs included more than one substance, and more than one-third of samples that were negative for alcohol were positive for cannabinoids.

PCP, or angel dust, is also in the top three drugs found in blood samples in Houston. This is part of why half of impaired driving cases in Houston would fall under the “extremely risky” category for driving injuries based on a study by the European Driving Under the Influence of Drugs, Alcohol and Medicine project, which looked at the relative risk of injury based on different types of impairment.

“These findings are terrifying. These are the people that share the road with you, me, our children and our loved ones,” Dr. Stout said.

HFSC is a local government corporation that provides forensic services to the City of Houston and other local agencies. HFSC is overseen by a Board of Directors appointed by the Mayor of Houston and confirmed by the Houston City Council. Its management structure is designed to be responsive to a 2009 recommendation by the National

Academy of Sciences that called for crime laboratories to be independent of law enforcement and prosecutorial branches of government.

HFSC operates in seven forensic disciplines.

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