

Making Road Dangers Invisible

Drunk Drivers and Other Dangers

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This essay describes a law passed in New York City in the late 1990s that characterizes the tough stance shared by lawmakers and the American public toward people who drink and drive. After acknowledging the serious dangers of drunk driving, Gladwell discusses the arbitrariness of the New York City law, given that there are a variety of causes of recklessness on the road besides drinking and driving. He highlights two particular behaviors—driving a sport-utility vehicle and talking on a cell phone while driving—that pose perhaps greater road hazards than drunk driving and yet receive much less public and policymaking attention. And indeed it is no accident that the behaviors that produce these other road hazards are not regarded as irresponsible in the way that drunk driving is. The manufacturers of sport-utility vehicles and cell phones play a powerful role in de-emphasizing the magnitude of the road dangers they pose.

Last week, New York City began confiscating the automobiles of people caught drinking and driving. On the first day of the crackdown, the police seized three cars, including one from a man who had been arrested for drunk driving on eight previous occasions. The tabloids cheered. Mothers Against Drunk Driving nodded in approval. After a recent series of brutal incidents involving the police tarnished the Giuliani administration, the Mayor's anti-crime crusade appeared to right itself. The city now has the toughest anti-drunk-driving policy in the country, and the public was given a welcome reminder that the vast majority of the city's thirty-eight thousand cops are neither racist nor reckless and that the justice they mete out is largely deserved. "There's a very simple way to stay out of this problem, for you, your family,

and anyone else," a triumphant Giuliani said. "Do not drink and get behind the wheel of a car."

Let's leave aside, for a moment, the question of whether the new policy is constitutional. That is a matter for the courts. A more interesting issue is what the willing acceptance of such a hard-line stance on drunk driving says about the sometimes contradictory way we discuss traffic safety. Suppose, for example, that I was stopped by the police for running a red light on Madison Avenue. I would get points on my license and receive a fine. If I did the same thing while my blood-alcohol level was above the prescribed limit, however, I would be charged with drunk driving and lose my car. The behavior is the same in both cases, but the consequences are very different. We believe, as a society, that the combination of alcohol and driving deserves particular punishment. And that punishment isn't necessarily based on what you have actually done. It's often based on what you could do—or, to be more precise, on the extra potential for harm that your drinking poses.

There is nothing wrong with this approach. We have laws against threatening people with guns for the same reason. It hardly makes sense to wait for drunks or people waving guns to kill someone before we arrest them. But if merely posing a threat to others on the road is the threshold for something as drastic as civil forfeiture, then why are we stopping with drunks?

Fifty per cent of all car accidents in the United States are attributed to driver inattention, for example. Some of that inattention is caused by inebriation, but there are other common and obvious distractions. Two studies made in the past three years—the first conducted at the Rochester Institute of Technology and the second published in *The New England Journal of Medicine*—suggest that the use of car phones is associated with a four-to-fivefold increase in the risk of accidents, and that hands-free phones may not be any safer than conventional ones. The driver on the phone is a potential risk to others, just as the driver who has been drinking is.

It is also now abundantly clear that sport-utility vehicles and pickup trucks can—by virtue of their weight, high clearance, and structural rigidity—do far more damage in an accident than conventional automobiles can. S.U.V.s and light trucks account for about a third of the vehicles on the road. But a hugely disproportionate number of the fatalities in two-vehicle crashes are caused by collisions between those bigger vehicles and conventional automobiles, and the people riding in the cars make up a stunning eighty-one per cent of those killed.

The reason we don't like drunk drivers is that by making the decision to drink and drive an individual deliberately increases his or her chance of killing

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someone else with a vehicle. But how is the moral culpability of the countless Americans who have walked into a dealership and made a decision to buy a fifty-six-hundred-pound sport utility any different? Of course, there are careful S.U.V. drivers and careful car-phone users. Careful people can get drunk, too, and overcompensate for their impairment by creeping along at twenty-five miles an hour, and in New York City we won't hesitate to take away *their* vehicles.

Obviously, Giuliani, even in his most crusading moments, isn't about to confiscate all the car phones and S.U.V.s on the streets of New York. States should, however, stop drivers from using car phones while the car is in motion, as some countries, including England, do. And a prohibitive weight tax on sport utilities would probably be a good idea. The moneys collected could be used to pay the medical bills and compensate the family of anyone hit by some cell-phone-wielding yuppie in a four-wheeled behemoth.

QUESTIONS

1. According to Gladwell, what kinds of road hazards are caused by talking on a cell phone while driving? What kinds of road hazards do sport-utility vehicles pose? How extensive are these hazards compared to the dangers of drunk driving?
2. Most people tend to view cell phones and sport-utility vehicles as adding a variety of advantages to their lives, *not* as menacing sources of danger. Let's take a moment to recognize how favorable impressions toward cell phones and sport-utility vehicles are reflected through advertising. Flip through a magazine and find an ad for a cell phone and an ad for a sport-utility vehicle. Then list the various benefits that the ads ascribe to each of these products.
3. Now spend a few minutes thinking more broadly about these ads. How do the wireless phone and automobile industries respectively advertise their products so that consumers are inclined to see the road hazards caused by talking on a cell phone while driving or driving a sport-utility vehicle as less in need of fixing than the road dangers caused by drunk driving?
4. Identify some of the ways that the manufacturers of cell phones and sport-utility vehicles can influence the level and kind of attention that lawmakers give to each of these consumer products.