

Drunken Drivers

Even more needs to be done to get them off roads

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A state senator draws 45 days in jail and a \$2,000 fine for drunken driving, second offense. Meantime, a private citizen with 12 previous alcohol-related convictions is arrested for a 13th time and jailed under a \$1 million bond.

What's the message here? Primarily that in spite of swifter, harsher penalties for drunken driving, alcohol remains a pervasive problem of powerful allure to people who should certainly know better. And drunken drivers remain the scourge of the highways. Arrests for drunken driving rose last year to nearly 62,000 in Michigan, but so did the number of alcohol-involved traffic deaths, from 525 up to 541.

Do many of the chronic drunken drivers need help? Sure. Alcoholism is a disease. But in the meantime, the innocents out there need protection. Jail is the foolproof method. But it's expensive, and the system is already overcrowded. Drunken drivers don't yet have the status of violent criminals where cell space is concerned, although they should, weaving around loaded as they do in their multi-ton lethal weapons.

In the alternative, the state has most recently enacted new means of immobilizing these rolling menaces. Unfortunately, judges don't appear very inclined to exercise their authority along these lines.

From Oct. 1 through the end of June, police -- acting under one of 45 new statutes aimed at drunken drivers -- seized license plates from 13,564 vehicles that were being driven by people arrested for a repeat offense. According to the Secretary of State's office, 10,598 of those drivers were convicted of at least a second alcohol-related offense, but courts ordered the immobilization of only 2,369 of their cars.

State officials say the reluctance seems to stem from uncertainty about the ownership of the vehicles, or disposal of them before conviction. If these numbers hold up, the Legislature may want to revisit this statute to clarify its intent: keeping the drunk off the road.

That could mean extending the immobilization authority to cover the driver's primary vehicle at the time of conviction. An electronic tether, which prevents the offending driver from starting a car, also holds promise.

Meantime, the state will also be assessing the impact of its new ability to block repeat offenders from registering vehicles. That law took effect June 1.

None of this is going to make drunken driving go away. But because we know that repeat offenders and scofflaws are the biggest contributors to the problem, the more the states and the courts are empowered to do to keep them off the road, the safer law-abiding citizens will be from one of the biggest threats they face every day.