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Officials grapple with drugged drivers

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When police suspect that someone is driving drunk, they usually can tell by the odor of alcohol or by using a Breathalyzer.

When someone has been using drugs and drives, it's just as dangerous, but law enforcement has fewer options.

"You don't have the smell, but you still have the impairment," said Cmdr. Joe Frega of the Geneva Police Department.

Another problem with drugged drivers, officials say, is that there isn't a good way to stop them.

"A bartender can cut [guys] off, but who's going to stop them from taking another hit?" Frega said.

Police don't have an easy test such as the Breathalyzer to see whether someone has drugs in their system. Often, that can be confirmed only through testing blood or urine, which can take hours.

However, more departments are training their officers to look for signs that a driver is under the influence of drugs.

Kane County law-enforcement officials say they are seeing more drivers under the influence of drugs, although drugged driving statistics aren't available.

Drugged driving falls under driving under the influence in Illinois, and it isn't distinguished from arrests on charges of drunken driving.

The National Transportation and Highway Safety Administration has just completed fieldwork on its first major study of the issue, and results are not yet available, spokesman Rae Tyson said.

Officers are seeing drivers combining alcohol and drugs before they get behind the wheel, a change from the past, said Detective John Sizer of the Sugar Grove Police Department.

"You'd pull [guys] over, and they'd be smoking a joint. And they'd roll down the window, and you'd get hit with a blast of it," Sizer said. "When you start mixing alcohol and drugs, one and one doesn't equal two anymore.

"It can be five, six, 10 times the effect of alcohol alone."

Coroners found that two Batavia men killed in an Aug. 4 crash near Sugar Grove had both marijuana and alcohol in their systems, as allegedly did the driver, who survived. The driver, Thomas Ofenloch Jr., 23, is charged with reckless homicide and aggravated drunken driving.

Police look for similar signs when spotting a drunken or drugged driver, said Comdr. Dave Kintz of the St. Charles Police Department. Speeding, swerving, sudden stops or prolonged stopping are usual signs of an impaired driver.

Once a driver is stopped, Kintz said, an officer might have some noticeable clue that he or she hasn't been drinking, such as a piece of drug equipment or a pill bottle in sight.

Unlike alcohol, though, police officers on the scene can't determine for certain that drugs are involved.

Bruce Talbot retired as a sergeant with the Woodridge Police Department after 23 years and now teaches field drug-screening courses. Talbot, who has taught classes sponsored by the Kane County State's Attorney's Office, said there were key signs that officers could use to determine what a person consumed before driving.



Photo illustration by Kendra Helmer

"All drugs of abuse, when taken at an abusive level – in other words, the person is high – affect the eyes and body systems in known ways," Talbot said.

For example, a driver under the influence of prescription narcotics, such as Vicodin or Oxycontin, will have pin-point pupils and lax muscles. A driver with cocaine in his system will have large pupils and rigid muscles, Talbot said.

If the officer has reason to suspect that the person has been using drugs, such as clear physical signs of impairment coupled with a "low blow" – or low reading – on the Breathalyzer test, he can take the person to a hospital for a blood or urine test to pin down the drugs or source of impairment.

Decisions to make arrests in such cases have to be based on multiple factors, Talbot said, because certain diseases and conditions can have the same symptoms.

Kane County, Talbot said, is the only one of the collar counties that routinely sponsors training on the topic.

Talbot and local law-enforcement officers would like to see more training, possibly at the academy level.

"We really need to take [the training] to the police academy," Talbot said. "This is something we should take to every recruit."

COMMENTS

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