Reflections on Doing Policy-Relevant Sociology: How to Cope with MADD Mothers

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The author's experiences in studying the ability of law to deter drunk driving lead him to conclude that research is selectively used by various politically-involved groups. These groups frequently are committed to specific definitions of a policy problem and to specific approaches to its resolution. The researcher finds that his product is not used for the purpose of selecting among alternative policy options, but instead it serves to supply rationalizations for positions to which the involved groups are previously committed.

Drunk driving is a social problem that has captured public attention and inspired political action in the decade of the 1980s. As a researcher whose work frequently has addressed drunk driving, I have been called on to participate in policy discussions on numerous occasions. Perhaps the major lesson I have learned is that the role of research is not to guide the policymaker in surveying and selecting promising policy options. Rather, research results appear to serve mainly as rationalizations for positions to which the policymaker is already committed on the basis of prior and scientifically irrelevant considerations.

The fact that my work bears on an important or, at least, much-discussed problem is fortuitous. I have intended my scholarly career to be based largely on investigating the capabilities and limitations of law as a tool of social control. I chose to pursue this question in the context of drunk driving for two methodological reasons. First, compared with most illegal behavior, drunk driving is reliably and validly indexed. Although direct measures of its extent are difficult and expensive to come by, valid surrogate measures such as nighttime fatal crashes are easily available and generally well reported. When deterrence-based

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laws are applied, a prompt and notable decline in the index is theoretically expected, and this expectation is testable with interrupted time-series intervention analyses. Second, many such interventions have been launched in recent years, providing numerous cases for quasi-experimental analysis. A great deal of knowledge about the capabilities and limitations of law can be acquired in the study of attempts to deter drunk driving.

Paradoxically, the basis for my role as an expert on drunk-driving policy comes from my attempt to retire from the field. After engaging in studies on drunk-driver deterrence in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and France, the convergence of findings encouraged me to review the world literature in order to produce a report summarizing what has been learned about these interventions in general. I spent the summer of 1980 reviewing the literature in the library of the U.S. Department of Transportation and published my findings as a government report in 1981 and, revised, in book form in 1982. It is perhaps of interest that I experienced difficulty in obtaining publication. Two publishers turned down the manuscript on the basis that the government report had exhausted the very limited market that might exist for a book about this subject. A third publisher accepted it with a foundation's promise to purchase 500 copies. At the time of writing this essay, the book is in its seventh printing.

The findings of the book can be summarized quickly. Dividing the drunk-driving interventions into those that aimed to increase the perceived certainty of punishment and those that aimed rather at increasing perceived severity, I found the world literature to endorse the deterrent effectiveness of the former but not of the latter. Well-publicized legislation designed to simplify detection and prosecution of the offense, and campaigns meant to increase arrests, seemed effective in reducing fatalities. However, the reductions tended to be short-term, with fatalities returning to their prior levels after a brief period. Furthermore, merely increasing the penalties for the offense, with no change in the likelihood of punishment, could not be shown to affect the amount of impaired driving, even in the short run. My understanding of these findings is that the threat to punish drunk drivers is, in virtually all cases, enforced at a negligible level of probability. Typically, the risk of apprehension for an impaired driver runs about one in a thousand offenses, or one in five thousand drunk miles driven. As drivers experience these miniscule levels of actual threat, the proclaimed penalties lose their credibility.

It was, of course, the victims' movement, spearheaded by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), that created the political climate in which drunk driving became worthy of public comment and action. The movement has been fueled by anger and grief, and its program has centered on severe punishment for drunk-driving offenders. Moreover, although small, the movement has had little opposition. By defining drunk driving as a matter of individual responsibility rather than as an expected and normal product of established institutions of recreation and transportation, the movement has avoided antagonizing the vested interests in the area, namely the automobile and alcohol industries. Indeed, MADD was for some