

Should Driving Under the Influence be Considered a Felony?

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Author's Note:

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Driving under the influence (DUI) negatively impacts all of those that are involved. The trait that makes humans most different from any other creature on our planet is the ability to be proactive. Sadly, we tend to focus on our reaction to events rather than how to prevent them from happening. In 2018, 10,511 people died from drunk driving (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2020). These preventable deaths have long-lasting effects on the families of those that have perished. The grief felt by these family and friends leads to poor mental health and increases the potential of substance abuse. There is a direct relationship between substance abuse and an increased chance of driving under the influence, further perpetuating the cycle.

Driving under the influence is a multifaceted problem that requires a proactive approach. The purpose of this essay is to provide an argument against the idea of a DUI being a felony. Besides, a discussion of the effects of being a felon follows.

Causes of Substance Abuse

To get to the crux of the DUI epidemic, we must first understand the socioeconomics and its relationship to substance abuse. There is a genetic component to mental illness. These factors lay dormant until activated by the environment in the individual life. For example, imagine a single mother trying to support her children. She must have a job to provide the general necessities for them (food, shelter, clothing, etc.). A dilemma follows; who is going to watch her children while she is trying to make a living? If she cannot afford childcare she may be forced to work multiple jobs to make ends meet. The pressure this places on the family unit can be crippling for some, leading to mental illness. Self-medicating with drugs and alcohol is often the easiest way to cope. The children learn the same coping mechanism. The cycle continues.

Effects of Being a Felon

Compounding the problems associated with a lower socioeconomic status, being a felon makes it even harder to gain employment. The stigma associated with those that are incarcerated is a large hurdle that must be overcome when finding work. Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson mentioned that those that are employed are less likely to be rearrested (Williams, Wilson, & Bergeson, 2019).

Those that have been charged with DUI are likely to have addiction problems that are not being treated. There is a stigma involved with addiction and the additional tag of felon creates a psychological burden that is too heavy to bear. The individual does not have the coping skills to address the mental illness. It is unlikely that they developed these skills after being in jail.

The inability to integrate into society once being incarcerated negatively affects the individual. The lack of coping skills is not gained in the correctional system and once released the added weight of being a felon makes it difficult to improve their mental health. Without the opportunities to treat their poor mental health the cycle is bound to continue upon release.

An Alternative to a Felony Charge

Rather than incarcerating an individual charged with a DUI, mandatory treatment should be required. The money saved by reducing the cost of housing an incarcerated individual can be improving counseling and mental health services, leading to improved mental health and fewer DUIs. Upon being pulled over by law enforcement the individual would first be taken into custody and charged with a misdemeanor. Rather than going to jail the individual would be taken to a treatment facility and will be required to stay to complete a rehabilitation program. During this program, the individual would gain insight into the root of their addiction and develop

strategies to cope with it. If the individual leaves they will be immediately placed under arrest and serve jail time and once again, will be forced to complete a treatment program. The skills gained through this program are essential to proactively eliminating the socioeconomic issues that cause drunk driving.

Conclusion

Drinking and driving negatively impact everyone involved. Reacting to this problem does not address the cause of why people drive under the influence. Neither does throwing them behind bars and calling them felons; instead, this only exacerbates the problem. Rather than spending money to house someone in a prison, those funds are better spent researching effective prevention strategies that aim to correct the root cause of addiction.

Esteemed psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi once said:

“To overcome the anxieties and depressions of contemporary life, individuals must become independent of the social environment to the degree that they no longer respond exclusively in terms of its rewards and punishments. To achieve such autonomy, a person has to learn to provide rewards to herself. She has to develop the ability to find enjoyment and purpose regardless of external circumstances” (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 2001).

We cannot change one’s genetic makeup, but we can change the social environment that rewards the achievement of milestones. When we celebrate the successes of those that struggle rather than emphasize their failures, we solve the problem of DUI.

References

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