



# Social Norms Predict Students' Intentions to Drink and Drive

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## Abstract

A phone survey of approximately 400 college students was conducted to determine the relative importance of various social norm constructs on intention to drive after drinking. Intention to drive after drinking the next time the student went out drinking was assessed, in addition to social norms and attitudes toward drinking and driving. Regression analysis revealed that proximal injunctive norms (what my friends want me to do) and proximal descriptive norms (the percent of my good friends who drive after drinking) were significant predictors of drinking and driving intention after accounting for past behavior and attitude. The distal descriptive norm (the percent of students at your university who drink and drive) was not a significant predictor of drinking and driving intention. These findings may shed light on the lack of success of social norms interventions that focus on messages conveying campus-wide statistics. Approaches that target subgroups of campus populations (e.g., fraternities, clubs) may be more appropriate.

## Background

In 2004, over 16,000 people in the United States died in alcohol-related car crashes, accounting for almost 40 percent of traffic-related fatalities (Solomon et al., 2008), which is the equivalent of approximately one death due to an alcohol-related car crash every half-hour. Although the incidence of alcohol-related crash fatalities is down from the early 1980s when almost 50 percent of traffic-related deaths were alcohol-related, further reducing such fatalities remains an important goal.

A recent focus on social norms as one contributor to drinking and driving suggests that people are more likely to drink and drive when they believe other people do. Furthermore, people have a tendency to misperceive norms for risky behavior such that they assume risky behaviors such as heavy drinking and driving after drinking are both more prevalent and more socially accepted than they really are (Miller, Monin, & Prentice, 2000; Perkins et al., 1999).

Interventions to address risky behavior that focus on social norms typically give students at a university information about the prevalence of healthy or risk-free behavior in the population. For example, such interventions may emphasize that the majority of students at the university drink three or fewer drinks on nights when they drink. Evaluations of social norms interventions have yielded mixed results (Perkins, et al., 1999; Wechsler et al., 2003).

Research in social norms has proposed that there are different types of social norms and that they may serve different functions (Lapinski & Rimal, 2005). However, work in the area of social norms interventions could benefit from greater clarity in the concept of norm (Real & Rimal, 2007; Rimal & Real, 2003). For example, often the norms that are used in social norms interventions are campus-wide, or distal, norms (e.g., Perkins et al., 1999). However, recent work has shown that norms are more influential when they are based on important reference groups (Christensen et al., 2004; Terry & Hogg, 1996).

The present work extends these earlier findings by examining specifically the role of distal and proximal norms in college students' intentions to drink and drive in the future. We also examine the specific type of norms that students consider, that is we assess both descriptive and injunctive norms for drinking and driving.

## Method

### Participants and procedures

- 400 students enrolled in the University of Alabama
- Approximately 100 participants each from Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, Senior classifications
- Average age 21.1
- 8% African-American, 86% White, remainder unknown or other
- 51% female
- Surveys administered by trained phone interviewers
- Participants recruited at random from all students enrolled at University of Alabama in Spring Semester 2008

### Measures

#### Control Variables

- Sex
- Number of past heavy drinking episodes in the past month
- Number of times drinking and driving in the past month
- Attitude toward drinking and driving,

#### Predictor Variables

- Descriptive norm for drinking and driving for close friends (proximal)
- Descriptive norm for drinking and driving for students at the university (distal)
- Injunctive norm for drinking and driving (i.e., do their friends want them to drive after drinking)

#### Dependent Variable

- Behavior intention (i.e., how likely they will drive after drinking the next time they party with friends)

		$\beta$	$t$
Step 1	Sex	--	--
	Times drank till felt drunk last 30 days	.144	2.97
	F(3,390) = 35.04	.391	8.12
Step 2	Sex	--	--
	Times drank till felt drunk last 30 days	.143	2.99
	F(4,389) = 30.42	.369	7.71
	Attitude toward drinking and driving	.163	3.64
Step 3	Sex	--	--
	Times drank till felt drunk last 30 days	.126	2.75
	F(7,386) = 25.29	.282	5.92
	Attitude toward drinking and driving	.122	2.83
	Proximal injunctive norm (what my friends want me to do)	.153	3.29
	Proximal descriptive norm (what my friends do)	.183	3.54
	Distal descriptive norm (what students at my university do)	--	--
p > .10		p < .05	p < .01

## Results

Regression analyses indicated that normative variables significantly increased the variance accounted for in intentions to drive after drinking even after controlling for sex, prior heavy drinking behavior, prior drinking and driving behavior and attitude toward drinking and driving (see Table 1). More prior drinking and driving, prior drinking behavior, and more positive attitudes toward drinking and driving all significantly predicted drinking and driving intentions. Importantly, high proximal descriptive norm and injunctive norms all predicted greater intention to drink and drive after accounting for prior behavior and attitudes. The distal descriptive norm (percent of students at the university who drink and drive) was not a significant predictor of intention.

## Conclusion

Proximal norms, both descriptive and injunctive, were important predictors of intention beyond prior drinking behavior, positive affect, and attitude. Distal norms, that is, those invoking the typical behavior of other students at the same university, were not predictive of drinking and driving intention. These findings suggest that social norms interventions are more likely to be effective if they focus on proximal rather than distal norms.

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