

EDGEwise

- Young people between the ages of 16 and 21 make up less than seven per cent of B.C. drivers, but were responsible for 20 per cent of all alcohol-related car crash fatalities in 2003. In the same year, 243 teenage passengers were injured or killed in cars driven by a drunk driver.
- Dr. Bonnie Leadbeater is a developmental psychologist and director of UVic's Centre for Youth and Society. Her research focuses on injury prevention in youth, the mental health of children and adolescents, teenaged mothers, peer victimization, and depression and aggression in youth.
- UVic's interdisciplinary Centre for Youth and Society works closely with community partners on such topics as: violence among youth; drug use and abuse; adolescent risk behaviour; teenage parenting; and suicide prevention. For more information visit www.youth.society.uvic.ca/.

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DIANA NETHERCOTT

DYING FOR A RIDE HOME

Teens know the tragic realities of drinking and driving. So why do they still do it?

Leadbeater, at a roadside memorial.

by Jessica Gillies

We've all seen them by the roadside—impromptu shrines of flowers, crosses, photos and messages of grief from friends and loved ones. It's a heartbreaking sight, especially when the car crash being memorialized involved teenagers and alcohol.

Today's teens have grown up with two warnings drilled into them—don't drink and drive, and don't get into a car with a driver who has been drinking. So why do so many of them continue to be injured or killed in alcohol-related car crashes?

Dr. Bonnie Leadbeater, a psychologist with the University of Victoria's Centre for Youth and Society, is looking for answers. She's working with the Vancouver Island Health Authority (VIHA) and the Island Regional Coroner's Office to find out why teens continue to be involved in alcohol-related car accidents.

The goal of the "Alternatives to Roadside Memorials Project" is to come up with more effective messaging for teens to prevent more tragedies—and the roadside memorials that inevitably follow.

Although alcohol use in B.C. is illegal for youth under 19, research shows that a majority of teens experiment with it at some point. "Abstaining completely from drinking and driving and from riding with others who are impaired is clearly the best approach," says Leadbeater, "but the wisest path is not always the one chosen."

"The 'tough' approach of showing kids car wrecks and taking them through the morgue scares most kids but seems to have little effect on risk-taking," says Leadbeater. "We need to get a better sense of the factors influencing their decisions, so that we can create more positive messages about safe driving and riding."

Who better to ask than teens themselves, and

research began with three focus groups in local high schools. "The students are consultants in this project," says Leadbeater. "We treat them like experts, because they are."

Ideas raised in the focus groups are being incorporated into the second part of the study, a questionnaire that will be distributed in January to about 1,000 local students in Grades 10, 11, and 12. The questionnaire focuses on student experiences with and attitudes toward alcohol, marijuana, and driving.

Pilot test results indicate that most teens try to make good decisions, but circumstances often limit their choices.

"There are real, practical reasons why they get into a car with an impaired driver," says Leadbeater. "Phoning their parents isn't always an option, taxis are expensive and they don't always have the fare, and the bus stops running fairly early. Choosing between accepting a ride with someone who has been drinking versus getting home late, walking

or being stranded is not always a straightforward decision."

The project's advisory board has representatives from the Insurance Corporation of B.C. (ICBC), the police, School District 61, UVic, VIHA, and the Capital Regional District (CRD).

"Everything we learn will go directly to the chief medical officer, Dr. Richard Stanwick, who will make recommendations to ICBC and transportation systems," says Leadbeater. The findings will also be incorporated into a CRD-ICBC traffic safety campaign encouraging teens to make safe choices.

"The overriding message for everyone, young or old, is don't drink and drive," stresses Stanwick. "But the message for youth has to be timely and on-point to have the desired result. We don't just want to reduce the number of roadside memorials. We don't want to see any at all."

The project is funded by the federal Department of the Solicitor General.

