

'That Poor Decision': Impaired Driving Arrests Increasing Across Cayuga County

[Kelly Rocheleau](#)

Sep 18, 2022



[Kelly Rocheleau](#)

JoLynn Mulholland knew people who only had the occasional drink before the COVID-19 pandemic. Then during the outbreak, it became one drink a night, before becoming multiple drinks a night in some cases.

Mulholland, the STOP Act Coordinator for the Drug-Free Community Coalition through the Cayuga Community Health Network, shared that observation in assessing a troubling trend that she and several law enforcement officials have been confronting — a noticeable increase this year in local arrests involving people operating a vehicle while under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

Law enforcement officials in Auburn and Cayuga County have expressed alarm over the uptick in such arrests this year, citing factors such as people dealing with isolation during the pandemic, people going out more following the rollback of COVID-19 restrictions and additional bars being open now.

Auburn Police Chief James Slayton told The Citizen that the APD made 29 driving while intoxicated arrests in all of 2021, compared with 38 DWI arrests from January through August this year. Auburn police made five driving while ability impaired by drugs arrests in total last year and were already at that same mark through Sept. 16 this year.

Older drivers

In Auburn, the problem is coming more from older residents, the chief said.

Looking at the arrest data, Slayton noted there doesn't appear to be many younger people getting DWI arrests, "which tells me that they're being responsible and getting rides, getting Ubers," adding that many younger people use ride-sharing programs. He praised younger people in the area for getting rides if they've been out drinking instead of getting behind the wheel themselves.

The average age of those in Auburn who have been picked up on DWIs was 27 years old in January, which Slayton said was the lowest average age of the year so far, as of Aug. 30, while the average age in July was 44. He noted the average age from February to July for DWI charges in the city was the mid-30s to low-50s, which he said has been the average age range for Auburn for around the last three years.

Slayton also noted that overall activity outside the home has picked up this year due to fewer pandemic restrictions and concerns.

"We're getting back, somewhat, to normal lifestyles. I wouldn't say (people) weren't out drinking, (but) there were restaurants that weren't open, there were bars that weren't open, so there weren't opportunities for people to be out as much as they are now again," he said.

Slayton said the APD has been proactive, with officers taking on extra traffic patrolling when they have time.

"It's always a concern, it only takes one incident to have a tragedy happen, somebody plowing through an event that's going on or somebody striking a family coming home late at night. So it's always concerning for us and the best thing that we can do is stay proactive like we have been," he said. "We do make more traffic stops now when officers are available."

Those arrest numbers are likely to rise, Slayton added, due to the APD's number of officers rising from previous years, so there more officers available to go on patrol. He used the example of seven officers working a shift. If five are on calls, two would still be available to make traffic stops.

"The more staff that we have, the more likelihood somebody's going to get caught (if they are drinking and driving)," Slayton said.

Cayuga County Sheriff Brian Schenck has also seen a year-to-year bump in such arrests. Thirty-eight DWI arrests were made by members of the Cayuga County Sheriff's Office in 2021, he said, with three driving while ability impaired by drugs arrests that year. That compares to the office's 50 DWI arrests and two driving while ability impaired by drugs arrests as of Sept 16, 2022.

"We have been doing a little bit more proactive enforcement but that doesn't account for the sharp increase in numbers. I think it's a clear indication that more people in our community are,

unfortunately, making that decision to drive under the influence," he said. "It's not a trend that we want to see continue."

A variety of people have been taking to the road while under the influence, Schenck said, noting that the sheriff's office's data shows a mix of males and females getting arrested from individuals in their 20s to those in their 60s.

The data from the sheriff's office as of Aug. 31, Schenck said, showed many arrests involve drivers going from establishments that serve alcohol and events where alcohol may be present.

"We also have, in a number of cases, these offenders indicating that they're coming from a friend's house and a family member's house and it appears that they've been using alcohol and then, unfortunately, make that poor decision," he said.

Schenck noted that intoxicated drivers put themselves and everyone around them at risk.

"Some of the worst crashes that I've been involved in investigating or been a responder to have been those where somebody under the influence has caused the death or serious injury of others," he said.

Emphasis on help

Schenck stressed that help is available for people struggling with alcohol abuse. He mentioned that organizations such as the Auburn-based nonprofits Nick's Ride 4 Friends and Confidential Help or Alcohol & Drugs can help people secure the assistance they need. Local government agencies such as the Cayuga County Mental Health Office can also help people locate resources.

"Many of the individuals that we arrest for driving under the influence, I'm certain, do have problems with addiction and they need that help, but I would encourage them or family members or friends to reach out and try to extend that hand to help them find the local resources that they need," Schenck said.

Schenck said the sheriff's office tries to highlight these services, frequently setting up tables at community events to provide people with information.

"We are out there working on prevention, as well, because we believe very strongly that that's a key aspect of solving this issue in our community," he said.

The sheriff's office has also been enacting what Schenck characterized as "aggressive" traffic enforcement.

"I'm certain that if somebody makes that decision and drives under the influence and they don't get caught, that they are or will do that again down the road," he said. "So it's key that we do that traffic enforcement and try to hold these offenders accountable."

More than alcohol

Speaking with The Citizen Sept. 7, Cayuga County Senior Assistant District Attorney Diane Adsit said there have been more driving while ability impaired by drugs cases now than she has seen in her entire career. She expressed worry about issues such as fentanyl ending up in other drugs.

"People think they're taking what they think is (a) harmless molly-type drug, but it's got fentanyl in it. We've got people who are overdosing in their cars and things like that ... so a bad issue is becoming worse," Adsit said. "Some of the marijuana use is increasing, so you're seeing more DWAI drugs (arrests) with marijuana."

She also noted that there are more drug recognition experts in the law enforcement community — because "drug use has become such a problem in all communities" — and that also has been bringing driving while ability impaired by drugs arrests up.

More officers are being trained as drug recognition experts in the state, Adsit said, mentioning that it is difficult to become such an expert. She said the Auburn barracks of the New York State Police has one drug recognition expert and the APD has one as well.

While citing the same trend of increased DWI cases this year compared with the previous one, Adsit also said the numbers didn't go down during the beginning outbreak as much as was anticipated at the time.

"I'm not sure why that happened, but we didn't drop anywhere near as far (in DWI arrests) than I thought we should have when everything was in lockdown," she said.

Additionally, Adsit noted that the number of DWI-related arrests that the Cayuga DA's office prosecuted, including driving while ability impaired by drugs cases, from Jan. 1 through Sept. 1 from 2018 to 2022, were higher before the pandemic than in the present days.

Adsit shared statistics with The Citizen within those parameters showing the DA's office handled 189 cases in 2018, 180 in 2019, 126 cases in 2020, 128 in 2021 and 134 through Sept. 1 in 2022.

"We are down a little bit from where we were before COVID," Adsit said.

She also noted in an email the average age of DWI-related offenders in Cayuga County is "significantly higher" than in other counties in the state.

Adsit said she feels these arrest numbers can be mitigated through education, advertising and emphasizing that there are consequences to driving while under the influence.

"Especially when we have deaths and we're prosecuting somebody for a homicide or vehicular assault, we try to make sure people know that there are serious consequences to these things," she said.

Despite the county's numbers seeing a hike from 2021 to 2022, there might not be a trend occurring statewide. Beau Duffy, director of public information for the New York State Police, said in an email that in comparing state police tickets only from Jan. 1 to Sept. 14 over the last three years, there were 7,146 DWIs in 2020, 8,813 in 2021 and 7,846 in 2022. For DWAI by drugs arrests during that same timeframe, there were 1,119 in 2020, 1,523 in 2021 and 986 in 2022.

Focus on solutions

Mulholland, who also serves as the State Opioid Response Grant prevention educator with CHAD, said she has spoken with Slayton and Schenck about the arrest increases as a part of monthly meetings with Cayuga County's Alcohol & Substance Abuse Committee.

Mulholland believes one of the factors behind the increase is New York's decriminalization of marijuana in 2021, as she believes that may have prompted more people to drive while using the substance. She also talked about the idea that even though marijuana is decriminalized in the state, that doesn't make it any less illegal or dangerous to use while behind the wheel. She noted that marijuana is addictive like alcohol and other substances.

"We want people to know that driving under the influence is still driving under the influence," she said.

She also said the STOP Act has been running training for bars, events that serve alcohol and any entity in the county that serves alcohol to help personnel stop overpouring, spot signs of alcohol intoxication in patrons, spot underage drinkers and noticing proper identification.

"We want to give people the confidence and the skills to do well in their jobs and to prevent alcohol tragedies," Mulholland continued.

Adding that Auburn has become a "brewery town" in recent years, she noted many IPAs and other beers served in breweries tend to have higher alcohol content levels.

Mulholland also feels society is playing a role.

"We normalize alcohol drinking as OK. We normalize, 'Oh, you're stressed because of your kids, here's a drink,' or 'You had a rough day at work, here's a drink,' Someone dies, 'Here's a drink,'" she said.

She also said there has been an increase of women in Cayuga County dealing with substance abuse and she believes there is stigma around women seeking substance abuse treatment. She talked about the importance of reducing stigma for people trying to get treatment. There are substance abuse counselors, she said, who have had clients who have brought children to meetings because they didn't have childcare.

"Prevention staff will meet you where you are at," she said.

"Addiction touches all aspects of life, race, gender, ethnicity," she added. "It doesn't matter who you are, we're willing to help you and give you the services you need so that can live a healthy life and learn from mistakes and move forward and make sure that you are healthy and you have the supports you need to live a successful life. It's doable."