

An Innovative Way to Curb Problem Drinking: South Dakota's 24/7 Sobriety Project

Alcohol consumption imposes a significant burden on the U.S. health care and criminal justice systems. Indeed, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that excessive alcohol consumption costs the United States nearly a quarter of a trillion dollars each year. A disproportionately high share of alcohol-related incidents involve problem drinkers—many of whom pass through the criminal justice system. In 2005, the state of South Dakota introduced an innovative approach to reduce problem drinking. Known as the 24/7 Sobriety Project (hereinafter, 24/7), the program requires individuals arrested for or convicted of alcohol-involved offenses to submit to breathalyzer tests twice per day or wear an alcohol monitoring bracelet at all times. Positive tests result in swift and certain, though modest, penalties, such as a day or two in jail. The approach is based on the idea that the certainty and rapidity, rather than the severity, of the punishment more effectively deters problem drinking.

The program has been widely embraced in South Dakota. By 2010, more than 17,000 of the state's 825,000 residents had participated in the program, including more than 10 percent of male residents between the ages of 18 and 40 in some counties. Although to date the program has won awards and has been implemented in other states, evidence about its effectiveness has been largely anecdotal and descriptive. No rigorous, peer-reviewed evaluation had been conducted to measure the program's effectiveness in reducing problem drinking. To address this knowledge gap, a team of RAND researchers assessed South Dakota's 24/7 program, using county-level data on program participation rates and information about driving under the influence (DUI) and domestic violence arrests, as well as traffic crashes, from 2001 through 2010. Results confirmed that the program has had some success:

- 24/7 reduced repeat DUI arrests at the county level by 12 percent.
- 24/7 reduced arrests for domestic violence at the county level by 9 percent.
- With respect to traffic crashes, the evidence was less conclusive. 24/7 did not reduce overall traffic crashes, but there is suggestive evidence that crashes among males age 18–40 fell as a result of the program.

These results support the view that swift, certain, and modest penalties associated with frequent monitoring can deter problem drinking and improve public health. The results may also offer an encouraging model for deterring problem behavior related to other forms of substance abuse. Further exploration and research will need to confirm whether this approach works equally well when extended to other jurisdictions and when combined with positive incentives and treatment services.

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