

The air is heavy and hot, with the dancing, writhing bodies of teenagers. The passing of drinks, the earsplitting bass from portable speakers, and shrieks of laughter fill the atmosphere, almost drowning out any sense of rationality. Someone hands you a red plastic cup, filled with some kind of an alcoholic drink. You ignore your fears of breaking the law and your conscience, and take a swig. You dance along, and you join the rhythm of the party, because you justify it to yourself. It seems like everyone does it, actually. Enjoy the moment, everyone seems to say, because you can. Bad things don't happen, and especially not to you.

Just outside, everything is different. The noise is muted and hazy, and only sharpens when someone occasionally opens the door. Millions of conversations, with shouts and laughs and chants, are dulled to a mild buzz from the distance, the air vibrating with lively music. The house and its partygoers, pulsing with energy and vitality, stand in stark contrast with the rest of the silent suburban world around them, while the twinkling stars watch solemnly from the sky.

Somehow, stepping outside and getting away from the hustle and bustle of a party makes reality come rushing back. Underage drinking, illegal drug use, and a whole host of other rule-breaking activities seem acceptable inside the house. But being suddenly alone, under the night sky, surrounded by houses filled with sleeping people just like those you love, puts everything in perspective. It's not just you, at that party, in that one moment. There are other people in the world. And sometimes, when you lose sight of that fact, when your perception becomes misconstrued, they are at your mercy.

Instances like these can help highlight how combating problems like underage drinking and driving drunk is largely governed by perception. For example, most teens believe they can get away with driving while intoxicated or distracted because the chances of a mistake are low,

that they personally will not be the unlucky ones. The math, of course, proves otherwise. People are afraid of plane crashes, lightning strikes, and terrorist attacks. However, according to The Economist, the odds of these happening are one in millions, if not more (“A Crash Course in Probability”). In contrast, the WHO reported 1.2 million road deaths in the world in 2013 (“Number of Road Traffic Deaths”). Furthermore, the leading cause of death for teens, aged 12 to 19, is automotive related (“Mortality Among Teenagers Aged 12-19 Years: United States, 1999-2006”).

Years of campaigning against distracted driving and driving under the influence have sought to use statistics like these – indicative of the horrific reality – to prove this perception wrong (Sealey). However, the issue remains. One major reason perception on this issue can be skewed is because of survivorship bias. It’s easy to find an older party-going friend with crazy, alcohol-filled stories, or admire a person’s dexterity for safely passing an intersection while texting, drinking coffee, and listening to music at the same time. But the reason it is so easy is because no one hears the stories or advice of people who died (Fera). This survivorship bias gives a heavier weight to the words and actions of the people around a teen, rather than the fear-inducing messages of a PSA or anti-drinking-and-driving campaign.

Another reason that teenagers are less likely to stop distracted or drunk driving involves their inability to surpass the role of a passive bystander. When the possibility that someone is going to drive on a public road with impaired judgment and coordination arises, it is the responsibility of the people around them to identify that risk. When people ignore that, they not only ignore the threats to the driver’s life, but also the lives of the families around them (“Drunk Driving Prevention”). Identifying drunk drivers is a duty for each person to prevent mindless death. Someone who lacks the cognitive ability to drive a car properly cannot make rational

decisions. It is better to accept that fact, stop them from driving, and potentially save lives than to stay a bystander and dodge guilt by shedding the responsibility on them.

Altering perceptions like these has been the conventional approach to resolving this issue. Because physically identifying distracted and intoxicated drivers before they enter the road is nearly impossible, the most effective solution has been to change common conceptions of the responsibility of teens as drivers and members of society. Although this technique has worked in reducing the number of teen drunk drivers by 54% (“Teen Drinking and Driving”), people still fall victim to preventive automotive accidents.

A new solution that would allow a short-term answer to the problem of fatalities that occur with today’s youth, in combination with the conventional long-term strategy to reduce the impact of drunk/distracted driving through education, would be more effective. One possibility is a policy that strives to fulfill the need for drunken teens to reach their destination safely. Local and municipal governments would employ drivers who can provide people with free rides at night. Each member of the community would be able to call a designated number if they wanted a ride from one area to another. Even if they are intoxicated minors or are in possession of alcohol, they would not be charged with any crime as long as they use the transport appropriately. The advantage of this program is that it would incentivize people to not drive intoxicated by removing the cost of a taxi fare and the possibility of criminal charges, and thus greatly reduce the risk to public safety.

Regardless of the policies and rules the government implements, one thing is clear: driving while inebriated or distracted is a choice. It is an irresponsible, despicable, and illegal act, but a choice nonetheless. Allowing yourself to forget the rest of the world, to adopt the

perception of selfish indulgence, even for a short time, can become devastating. Sometimes, the right choice is obvious; you just need to walk outside to see it.