

## FEATURED LETTER

# Young drivers and drinking are too often a fatal mix

*With Labor Day weekend upon us and college students returning to school, we offer this week a series of pieces from Somerset County law enforcement leaders and EmPoWER Somerset on the dangers of underage drinking.*

Thousands of Somerset County workers will join the millions of Americans in celebrating the Labor Day weekend, marking the traditional end of summer fun and the beginning of the school year. Labor Day is also known as the second deadliest holiday of the year, outdone only by Thanksgiving. The National Safety Council estimates 400 people will die in traffic crashes during the Labor Day holiday period.

The truth is sobering; alcohol-related crashes account for roughly 200 deaths per year, or about 32 percent of all fatalities on New Jersey roadways. Statistics from 2001-2010 by the National Safety Council show fatal crashes by people 16-20 with a blood-alcohol count of .08 or higher to be at 1,420, or 18 percent of those killed in vehicle crashes.

This is an alarming number when you consider the national drinking age is 21, meaning this age group is not legally permitted to drink any alcohol, much less be over the legal limit. The age group of 21-24 and has a death rate of 1,979, or 33 percent, in vehicle crashes due to being over the legal limit of alcohol.

Somerset County Police will be out in full force participating in the "Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over" Impaired Driving Enforcement Crackdown. To help us save lives with this project we instituted a hotline, 908-526-2500.

People in Somerset County can call the hotline, anonymously, to report stores or restaurants selling alcohol to underage children, parties where underage drinking could be a problem, or anyone you see driving erratically. Please do not use the phone without a hands-free device, and do not text and drive. Distracted driving can be as dangerous as driving while impaired.

The hotline offers concerned individuals the opportunity to share information with authorities, which not only helps enforce the law, but also may help save a life.

Here are a few survival tips for a safe holiday. The first thing is to allow plenty of travel time to avoid frustration and diminish the impulse to speed. If you plan to drink, designate a non-drinking driver or plan for alternative transportation, such as a taxi. EmPoWER Somerset has a list of cab companies that will drive you or a loved one home. Locate them at [www.empowersomerset.com](http://www.empowersomerset.com).

Young drivers are at particular risk in alcohol-related crashes. If there is a young driver in your family, strictly enforce a zero-tolerance policy with alcohol. Your best defense against a drunk driver is wearing your safety belt, so buckle up. Establish a driver's distraction-free zone, to include cell phones, video games, and global positioning systems. Drive defensively and exercise caution, especially during inclement weather.

We wish you all a safe, happy and healthy Labor Day. Remember that the police are out there to help keep our roads in Somerset County safe for you and the other users of the road.

*William G. Parenti*  
NORTH PLAINFIELD POLICE CHIEF



When scanned with a smart phone, this QR code will take users directly to a page on the EmPoWER Somerset website listing local cab companies with the areas they serve, hours of operation and phone numbers.