

Kennedy Nichols, Cheatham County Central High School, 2019

Explain why Maggie's Law is a major step forward in getting us to realize the seriousness of driving sleepy.

Busy high school students like myself are certainly no strangers to sleepiness and many of us seem to fervently live by the phrase "Sleep? Who needs sleep?" In the hallways of my high school, teens can often be heard boasting about how little they slept the night before, almost as if they are in some unspoken competition where the esteemed victor is the contestant running on the least amount of sleep. What my classmates fail to recognize, however, is their increased risk of becoming involved in fatal car crashes due to burning the candle at both ends. Drowsy driving is a significant and potentially deadly hazard that impacts thousands of people in the United States each year. Drowsy driving is, in my opinion, impaired driving. Fortunately, Maggie's Law is helping to minimize these numbers by holding drowsy drivers accountable for their life-threatening actions and, consequentially, heightening public awareness of the dangers of drowsy driving.

To fully comprehend the importance and significance of Maggie's Law, one must first understand the dangers of drowsy driving and its prevalence in America. Given the various negative consequences, drowsy driving undoubtedly poses a substantial threat to all motorists. In fact, research suggests that drowsy driving could be just as dangerous as driving under the influence. According to an informational brochure from the National Sleep Foundation, people who are awake for over 20 hours share similar impediments with those who have a blood alcohol level of 0.08 %. Information from the Drowsy Driving organization's website adds to this and

with additional evidence from the National Sleep Foundation, they suggest that sleepiness not only increases a driver's chances of crashing, but also weakens performance, awareness, judgement, and reaction times in the same manner that alcohol and drugs do. The impact tiredness has on the aforementioned aspects of safe driving is additionally demonstrated by the simple fact that crash scenes involving drowsy driving typically lack any signs of attempts to avoid collision. According to researchers Alistair W. MacLean, David R. T. Davies, and Kris Thiele, other potential consequences of drowsy driving include increased variability in speed and lane position as well as "increased number of off-road events." Such reckless driving behaviors not only endanger the person behind the wheel, but also the other innocent motorists sharing the road with those who are sleep impaired.

Unfortunately, regardless of the adverse repercussions of driving while sleep-deprived, people still get involved in drowsy-driving-related incidents. According to a 2017 report from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, "Drowsy driving was reportedly involved in 2.3 to 2.5 percent of all fatal crashes nationwide from 2011 through 2015." The report also stated that a total of 396,000 crashes involving drowsy driving occurred between 2011 and 2015, 90,000 of which occurred in 2015 alone. However, another study described by Justin M. Owens, Thomas A. Dingus, Feng Guo, Youjia Fang, Miguel Perez, Julie McClafferty, and Brian Tefft on the website for the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety provides even more distressing statistics. Results from the Second Strategic Highway Research Program Naturalistic Driving Study indicate that 8.8% to 9.5% of all the crashes examined from a sample of over 3,500 drivers between October 2010 and December 2013 involved drowsiness. Clearly, action needs to be

taken to stop this drowsy driving epidemic. Fortunately, Maggie's Law has helped America advance towards achieving this goal.

Although the National Congress of State Legislatures' website reports that Alabama, California, Florida, Texas, and Utah have all made state-wide efforts to increase awareness of the dangers of drowsy driving, only New Jersey and Arkansas have actual laws prohibiting fatigued driving. According to an article by Lauren Johnston from CBSNews, Carol McDonnell lobbied for Maggie's Law after her daughter Maggie passed away in 1997 from a drowsy-driving-related crash. Johnston and Michael J. Sateia state in their respective articles that Michael Coleman, the man responsible for Maggie's death, admitted to both smoking crack cocaine and staying awake 30 consecutive hours prior to the fatal accident. However, Coleman was ultimately penalized with a mere \$200 fine and a suspended jail sentence. Sateia states that McDonnell later sought to reduce drowsy driving's death toll by ensuring that punishments for future cases would be more severe. As a result of her efforts, prosecutors in New Jersey are now allowed to "charge a sleep-deprived driver [who has been involved in a fatal crash and has not slept in over 24 hours] with vehicular homicide, punishable by up to 10 years in prison and a \$100,000 fine."

Although Maggie's Law has admittedly been criticized in the past as most current methods of determining overall drowsiness are subjective and the law is therefore difficult to enforce, Maggie's Law has nevertheless proven to be a major step forward in raising public awareness of the dangers of drowsy driving. Since it is now illegal for citizens of New Jersey to drive without sleeping sometime within 24 hours of getting behind the wheel, they are more cognizant of the severity of drowsy driving as well as their own wakefulness on the road.

Additionally, in order to avoid arrest, New Jersey citizens concerned about their now-illegal driving behavior might prevent future drowsy driving incidents by researching effective procedures that help combat their own sleepiness.

However, as beneficial as Maggie's Law is, there is still much work to be done to eliminate drowsy driving in America. The creation of a more effective drowsiness-measuring system, for example, would be beneficial in both prosecuting fatigued drivers and helping people better grasp the severity of drowsy driving. While Maggie's Law addresses drivers with over 24 hours with no sleep, many people are impaired with less than this. Additionally, more laws regulating drowsy driving in other states would ensure that people across the nation feel the need to stay alert on the road. Awareness-building organizations like the Kyle W. Kihnl Memorial Foundation also prove to be extremely effective in reducing the number of drowsy-driving-related incidents.

Ultimately, however, the termination of sleep-deprived driving starts with us. We have the power to control our actions. We have the power to check for signs of drowsiness before and while driving to ensure that we do not pose a threat to others or ourselves. We have the power to pull over when we realize we are too tired to drive safely. One person can make a difference and save a life – their own or someone else's. Maggie's Law is a significant step in the right direction, but we need more. We need to create legislation and public service announcement campaigns for people to understand the true impact of driving with little or no sleep that happens in under 24 hours. We can take this law that was passed in 2003 and make it better. Sleep? Who

needs sleep? We all do, so we can avoid needless tragedies on the road that will haunt us in our sleep.