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Wisconsinites must absorb sobering report

We have one word for the fact that Wisconsin leads the nation in drinking and driving: Despicable.

In a report released last week, the federal government says 26.4 percent of Wisconsin adults admitted driving under the influence between 2004 and 2006. That compares to Utah, where fewer than 10 percent did so. Southern states showed good marks, as well.

Experts said faith is a factor in lower rates. In Utah, many people are Mormon, which forbids alcohol use. Religious affiliations in southeastern states also reduce alcohol use.

Meanwhile, the Midwest is a hotbed of drinking and driving. Here, too much of our social life revolves around alcohol.

No wonder we have stories like that of Krystal Hart. The Walworth County 16-year-old faces a charge of homicide by intoxicated use of a vehicle after a crash last November. Now, she's accused of violating her bond by drinking at a party March 15.

No wonder we have stories like that of Danny King, who told his sobering tale last week during a mock crash at Parker High School. King, now 23, started drinking as a Parker sophomore. Four years ago, after a night of drinking, he crashed head-on into another car, killing a young woman.

"There wouldn't be anything I wouldn't do to trade places with her," King told Parker students.

Like too many kids, he believed he was untouchable, invincible.

"And all because I wanted to be cool and wanted to be a hot shot," he said.

He added: "Being sober is the coolest thing to do. ... One night of drinking is not worth somebody's life."

The mock crash and King's speech were efforts to encourage students to enjoy Parker's Saturday night prom while sober. Did his message sink in? Or did the extra patrols by sheriff's deputies Saturday night help prevent tragedy?

We hope students at Craig and other high schools yet to hold their proms enjoy a safe and sober event, as well.

King is no hero. After all, the night of his crash, he played beer pong—a game that encourages excessive drinking—and drove to a Whitewater bar with a borrowed ID. But he deserves credit for sharing his story. It might have kept some students from drinking Saturday night.

But Wisconsin must take two steps to move out of the top spot among drinking drivers.

First, we need stronger laws targeting drunken drivers. Lawmakers must get tougher with those convicted as few as three times and require Breathalyzer-type devices in vehicle ignitions of all repeat offenders.

Second, Wisconsin must embrace cultural change. That will take a long-term effort. But organizations such as Partners in Prevention-Rock County are working diligently toward that goal.

We must support those efforts and reduce the emphasis on alcohol at social gatherings.