



## UC Irvine to study reducing alcohol-influenced crash injuries

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### Dr. Federico Vaca to lead effort to identify risk factors among young drivers



**Orange, Calif.** — UC Irvine [emergency medicine](#) expert Dr. Federico Vaca, one of the nation’s leading researchers on motor vehicle crash injuries and prevention, has received a grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to explore the potential of an age-based, early-alcohol-exposure risk assessment policy to reduce crash injuries and deaths among young drivers.

The study, funded by the NIH’s National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), is crucial because the societal cost of U.S. motor vehicle crashes is estimated at more than \$1.365 trillion annually, with \$296 billion involving drivers with over-the-limit blood alcohol concentrations, said Vaca, a professor and executive vice chair of the UC Irvine School of Medicine’s Department of Emergency Medicine.

Over the last 10 years, the national rate of fatalities attributed to driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs has increased 24%. In 2022 alone, there were 13,524 alcohol-impaired driving fatalities, accounting for 32% of the 42,514 U.S. motor vehicle crash deaths that year.

The most vulnerable are drivers between ages 21 and 24, who have the highest proportion of alcohol-related fatal crashes, said Vaca, who last year was named president of the Association for the Advancement of Automotive Medicine.

With previous NIAAA support, Vaca and his team have extensively studied the behaviors of young adults who ride with impaired drivers as well as those who drive while impaired. Over the last 20 years, his research has focused on injury science — encompassing motor vehicle crash injury epidemiology and prevention efforts — as well as related health disparities among U.S. youth and Latino populations.

Vaca was the founding director of UC Irvine medical school’s Center for Trauma & Injury Prevention Research and the Yale Developmental Neurocognitive Driving Simulation Research Center. His research has been supported by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the NIH Office of Behavioral and Social Sciences Research, and NIAAA.

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