

Illicit Drugs and Driving

The Scottish Executive and Road Safety Scotland commissioned a team comprising MORI Scotland, the Centre for Drugs Misuse Research at Glasgow University and Professor Steve Stradling of Napier University's Transport Research Institute to conduct research to investigate the prevalence and social context of drug driving. The research consisted of a survey of 1,031 17-39 year old drivers and qualitative interviews with problem drug users, recreational drug users and people who had been passengers of drug-drivers.

Main Findings

- The proportion of people who said they had ever taken drugs was consistent with previous surveys (39%). However, fewer people said that they had taken drugs in the past 12 months compared with the 2000 drugs and driving survey (9% in 2005 compared with 15% in 2000).
- With regard to drug-driving, 6% had ever drug-driven and 3.5% had done so in the last 12 months. There was no significant change between the prevalence recorded in 2000 and that recorded in 2005.
- Two main explanations for drug driving emerged from the depth interviews. First, driving after using drugs was simply more convenient than using another form of transport. Second, there is a lack of deterrents to drug-drive.
- All risky driving behaviours (e.g. drunk-driving, speeding) appear to be linked through the personality characteristic of "sensation seeking". Respondents who had drug driven had higher sensation seeking scores than those who had not.
- 13% of survey respondents had been a passenger of a drug driver. From the depth interviews it was clear that most of the people who had been passengers had also been using drugs and were making social journeys.
- Those who had desisted from drug driving were more likely than those who had drug-driven in the last 12 months to be with a partner. They were aware of the consequences and implications that getting caught could have.

Introduction

In 2005, the Scottish Executive and Road Safety Scotland commissioned research into the prevalence and social context of illicit drug driving in Scotland.

A survey of 1,031 drivers aged 17-39 years old collected information on:

- Prevalence and trends of drug use
- Prevalence and trends of drug driving
- Key characteristics of drug drivers
- Sensation seeking
- Incidence of other risky driving behaviours

This survey aimed to provide a nationally representative sample of 17-39 year old drivers and to provide robust comparisons with the Drugs and Driving survey conducted in 2000.

Depth interviews with recreational drug users (identified by the survey), problem drug users (recruited from the DORIS study)¹ and passengers of drug drivers provided further detail regarding the social context and circumstances of drug driving.

Prevalence of Drug Use

Over a third (39%) of the people interviewed said they had ever used drugs and 9% said they had done so in the previous twelve months.

This 'ever' figure is consistent with previous trends but the 'last twelve months' figure is lower and suggests that this survey might be underestimating the prevalence of drug use among 17-39 year old drivers.

After considering the extent of any under-reporting, it is estimated that up to 16% might have used drugs in the previous twelve months.

Analysis was undertaken of certain demographic variables:

- men reported higher levels of drug use both 'ever' and in the past 12 months.
- there was no clear age trend with drug use most common among 20-24 year olds and 30-34 year olds compared with the other age groups

¹ The Drug Outcome Research in Scotland (DORIS) study is an evaluation of drug treatment services within Scotland and involves the participation of 1,007 problem drug users.

- those who were single reported higher levels of recent drug use than did those who lived with a partner.

The most common drug used was cannabis, with 35% of the 17-39 year old driving population ever having used this drug. Among those who had used cannabis in the past year, use was fairly frequent with a fifth saying they used cannabis once or twice a week.

Prevalence of Drug Driving

With regard to drug driving, 6% said they had ever drug-driven and 3.5% had done so in the previous twelve months.

Again, the potential for under-reporting to have affected this was examined and it was estimated that up to 11% might ever have driven while impaired and up to 6% might have done so in the previous twelve months. The differences between this survey and the survey in 2000 – whether based on adjusted or unadjusted estimates – were not statistically significant, so the conclusion is that the prevalence of drug driving has not changed since 2000.

Analysis of demographic variables showed:

- men were no more likely than women to report drug driving
- there were no clear age trends
- single people were more likely than those who live with a partner to have drug driven in the past year
- drug drivers are less frequent drivers than those who have never drug-driven
- drug drivers have higher sensation seeking scores.

In line with drug use, the drug most frequently used when driving was cannabis. Most journeys made while drug driving were for social reasons, e.g. driving to/from a friend's house.

Explanations of Drug Driving

The explanations that respondents gave for drug driving were mainly centred on two key themes: incentives to drug drive and a lack of deterrents that would dissuade.

The recreational drug users said they drove while impaired as part of their social activities. There was a general feeling that driving was a more convenient method of travel than public transport.

The problem drug users reported a wider range of incentives for drug driving but the convenience of it still dominated. One

of the main uses of the car for this group was to get drugs and it was quicker and provided more privacy than public

There is a lack of disincentives to drug drive because most people do not believe that drugs have an adverse effect on their driving. This view is common in both the survey and the depth interviews. Some recreational users even felt that their driving improved while impaired by cannabis and problem drug users said they took drugs to return to a state of normality.

Additionally, most drivers do not think there is a significant risk of being caught by the police.

First, they do not believe it is likely they will be stopped because their driving is not erratic enough. Second, even if they were stopped, the overwhelming opinion is that there are not effective tests for detecting whether someone has been taking drugs.

Attitudes towards the Law

Almost half of respondents thought that drug driving was more dangerous than drunk driving but that someone under the influence of drugs is less likely to get caught.

The great majority of survey respondents said that the police should be able to stop and test people they suspect are driving while impaired.

Both problem drug users and recreational drug users think there should be more reliable tests to identify drugged-drivers.

Sensation Seeking

Sensation seeking is a personality characteristic that refers to the propensity to seek out novel or intense situations and being willing to take a risk to achieve these.

Those who reported involvement in risky driving behaviour (e.g. drunk-driving, speeding etc) had higher sensation seeking scores than those who did not.

Drug drivers had the highest sensation seeking scores.

Passengers

Thirteen percent of the survey respondents said they had been a passenger in a car driven by someone under the influence of drugs.

Almost half said they had been concerned about the individual's driving. Whether or not someone was concerned about the driving depended on their own past drug use and the types of drugs the driver had taken.

From the interviews, most of the people who had been passengers had also been using drugs and were involved in social journeys.

Desistance from Drug-Driving

Those who had desisted from drug driving were more likely to be with a partner than those who had drug driven in the last 12 months.

In the depth interviews there was a feeling among this group that they had increased responsibilities and 'more to lose'.

They were particularly aware of the implications and consequences of getting caught.

Recommendations

Several recommendations can be drawn from the findings of this research. These include:

- targeting campaigns at single men, the group most likely to drive
- communicating the message that drugs can have an adverse effect on driving and making people more aware of the risks of drug driving
- linking campaigns together, as all risky driving behaviours appear to be linked to some extent
- having more police presence, more effective testing for drugs and more roadside testing for drugs.

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The report "Illicit Drugs and Driving", which is summarised in this research findings is a web only document and is available on the publications pages of the Scottish Executive website at www.scotland.gov.uk/publications/recent

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ISBN 0-7559-6093-9

