

Transport Research

Drinking and Driving 2007: Prevalence, Decision Making and Attitudes

TNS System Three

The overall aim of the study was to examine prevalence of, and attitudes towards, drinking and driving amongst drivers in Scotland. Particular emphasis was placed on exploring the decision making process behind deciding to (or not to) drink and drive, including any audit of risks and consequences this involved. The research was designed to provide insight that could be used in future anti- drink-drive campaigns and communications.

Main Findings

- There has been a decrease in the levels of both driving after drinking any alcohol and of driving after drinking alcohol beyond the legal limit¹ ('drink-driving') since previous research was carried out in 2001². Between 2001 and 2007, the prevalence of ever driving after drinking alcohol decreased from 55% to 43%, and doing so in the past 12 months decreased from 37% to 25%. Prevalence of ever drink-driving decreased from 22% to 18%, whilst doing so in the past 12 months remained constant at 5%.
- Men, people aged 30 to 59, and people in higher social grades were more likely to have driven after drinking alcohol. Although fewer people in older age groups reported driving after drinking alcohol, those that did, did so more often than those in other age groups. No differences were found between drivers who lived in rural compared with urban areas.
- A key reason given for driving after drinking alcohol was that it was legal to do so, up to a certain level. However, there was considerable confusion about what the legal limit was and how it related practically to the amount of alcohol drunk. Most respondents who did drive after drinking alcohol applied a 'rule of thumb' of drinking no more than two alcoholic drinks (of any type, strength or size) before driving. Having a zero alcohol limit before driving and reducing the permitted amount were both suggested as means to reduce this ambiguity.
- Despite the general perception that drink-driving is socially unacceptable, people who did drink-drive considered it to be a low-risk activity in terms of the likelihood of being involved in an accident or of being caught. Furthermore, knowledge of the penalties and consequences of being caught was low. Around half of drivers were aware of the year's loss of licence although fewer were aware this happened in all cases. Few knew that being caught drink-driving led to a criminal record and the conviction appearing on a licence. This lack of knowledge undoubtedly leads some who drink-drive to underestimate the penalties.
- Future communications should raise awareness of the full range of consequences of drink-driving and tailor communications to particular groups. Groups such as those who drive habitually when well above the limit, people who drive when they are bordering on the limit and do not recognise themselves as 'drink-drivers', and people who drive the morning after drinking alcohol when still over the limit would all be legitimate targets for such campaigns.

¹ The current legal limit for driving is of 80 milligrams (mg) of alcohol per 100 millilitres (ml) of blood, which equates to 35 micrograms (mcg) of alcohol per 100ml of breath.

² NFO System Three Social Research (2001) *Drinking and Driving: Prevalence, decision-making and attitudes*. The Scottish Executive: Edinburgh <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/cru/kd01/blue/ddpda-00.asp>

Background and Method

While much progress has been made in the field of drink-driving, road safety statistics and conviction statistics show that further work is still needed. In 2007, the Scottish Government and Road Safety Scotland commissioned research from TNS System Three into drinking and driving. This followed on from research carried out on 2001 and was designed to allow comparisons to be made over time.

Quantitative research, in the form of a survey of a representative sample of 1034 current drivers in Scotland, took place between January and March 2007. Qualitative research, in the form of 6 focus groups and 6 depth interviews with people who admitted to driving after drinking alcohol, was undertaken in June 2007.

The purpose of the research was to measure prevalence of driving after drinking alcohol, both within and above the legal limit, and to provide insight into attitudes to drink-driving and the thought process behind the decision either to do or not to do so.

Who drinks and drives

Measures of prevalence from this survey, compared with the 2001 research, showed that there had been a reduction in the levels of driving after drinking any quantity of alcohol and in drink-driving.

Prevalence of driving after drinking any alcohol decreased since 2001. There was a decrease in ever having driven after drinking, from 55% to 43%, and a decrease in having done so in the past twelve months, from 37% to 25%. Incidence of driving after drinking alcohol in the past 12 months also decreased, from 229 to 154 incidents per 100 drivers.

Men, people aged 30 to 59, and people in higher social grades were more likely to have driven after drinking ever and in the last 12 months. Incidence increased by age despite the lower prevalence in older age groups. So, older people drove after drinking more often, although a smaller proportion of them actually did so at all. In line with the previous research, people living in rural areas were no more likely to have driven after drinking any alcohol than people living in urban areas.

Prevalence of ever drink-driving decreased from 22% in 2001 to 18% in 2007 and, while prevalence of having done so in the past 12 months remained constant at 5%, the incidence (i.e. the number of times per 100 drivers) decreased.

Again, life-time prevalence of drink-driving was higher amongst men. Prevalence had fallen in men and across all

age groups, though it remained constant in women, and the drop among the youngest age group (17 to 29) was very small. This is likely to reflect the low levels of prevalence in these groups at the baseline measurement.

Why drink and drive

Information was gathered about the situations in which people were most likely to drink alcohol and then drive. The last occasion on which survey participants reported driving after drinking was more often in the evening at the weekend. In contrast, focus group participants said they did so on casual nights out, often on weekdays rather than weekends. Driving after drinking with a meal was said to be relatively common, as the effect of alcohol taken in combination with food was thought to be reduced. Few drivers in the survey said they drove the morning after drinking.

Most who reported driving after drinking alcohol were driving home from someone's house or a night out. Journeys tended to be over short distances within cities, towns or villages, and mainly on quiet roads in lit-up areas. Drivers in rural areas tended to drive longer distances than people in urban areas.

Various reasons were given for driving after drinking alcohol, including a lack of alternative transport. In the survey, drivers said they did so because they thought they were under the legal limit and their driving ability was unaffected. The fact that it is legal to drink some alcohol prior to driving was given as reason for drinking and driving by focus group participants.

What people think about drinking and driving

Generally, the concept of drink-driving and the phrase 'drinking and driving' were associated with being significantly, rather than slightly, over the limit. The predominant social view was that drinking and driving is anti-social.

In the survey, around 6 in 10 drivers said they would not drink any alcohol before driving. Using a unit calculator, drivers who would drink something before driving most often said 2 units or 1 unit was a safe amount to drink³.

In the focus groups, people who drink before driving commonly accepted the maximum amount to drink before driving to be 2 drinks. This was regardless of the strength of

³ A unit is the approximate amount contained in half a pint of ordinary strength beer or lager (4% alcohol by volume), a single pub measure of spirits (25ml) or a small glass (125ml) of ordinary strength wine (9% alcohol by volume). It should be noted that there is no way of calculating a 'safe' amount of alcohol in terms of the legal limit for drinking and driving, due to individual differences in the way alcohol affects the body.

drink or size of glass. They sometimes stretched this to more than 2 drinks. It was acknowledged that this could lead drivers to being just over the limit. Despite this, the majority was convinced their drinking before driving was controlled and rarely resulted in them being more than a little over the limit.

Focus group participants were aware that a number of factors made personal 'safe' limits vary, depending on the individual and the situation. However, they expressed uncertainty about how this related to legal limits and how such limits could be measured practically.

Nearly 4 in 5 survey respondents agreed with the statement 'I don't think people should be allowed to drink any alcohol before driving'. Focus group respondents, who did drink and drive, had mixed opinions on changing the legal alcohol limit to zero. Some felt that a zero limit would remove confusion and would deter some people from drinking and driving because the law would no longer allow it. Others argued it would be impractical to enforce a zero limit. People felt that lowering the legal limit would be more practical, particularly to a level which equated to more than one drink (or unit) being over the limit.

Consequences of drinking and driving

The focus groups explored in detail the perceived consequences of drink-driving. People who did drink-drive believed it to be a low-risk activity. While killing someone was the most serious consequence, it was considered so unlikely that it was effectively dismissed. Getting caught was a bigger fear, although it was still seen as highly unlikely. This assessment of the low level of likelihood of being caught was reinforced, for some, by their experience.

Knowledge of penalties given to drink-drivers was mixed. Around half of drivers in the survey knew of the year's loss of licence, though fewer thought this happened in all cases, particularly if drivers were just above the limit. Few knew of the criminal record or conviction appearing on a licence. This lack of knowledge undoubtedly leads some who drink and drive to underestimate the penalties and consequences. Once the penalties were explained to drivers in the survey, the majority (61%) thought they were about right, although 1 in 7 thought they were too tough.

It was apparent that a number of people who drink and drive had never seriously considered the consequences of being caught nor the associated penalties. When asked to think about it, the consequences they did recognise included loss of job, lack of mobility (especially in rural areas) and social stigma. The most powerful images were evoked when thinking about how they would feel at the point of arrest or

of disqualification. Drivers who had been disqualified provided compelling accounts of the trauma of being arrested and held in a police cell and the embarrassing, inconvenient or costly consequences of being disqualified and having a conviction for drink-driving on their licence.

Recommendations

The research suggests that drink-drivers do not take their actions seriously enough. The study showed that, while drivers recognised that being caught drinking and driving would have a great impact on their lives, the consequences tended to be dismissed as being very unlikely to happen. Additionally, the impact is underestimated due to a lack of knowledge about penalties and lack of thought about the emotional and practical consequences of being arrested, charged and convicted.

Communications should emphasise the implications of being caught. This includes strengthening the association of drink-driving as a criminal act, which results in a criminal record and associated long-term consequences.

Specific groups of drink-drivers should be targeted with tailored communications. Groups such as: people who drive habitually when well above the limit; people who drive when they are bordering on the limit and, therefore, do not recognise themselves as 'drink-drivers'; and people who drive the morning after drinking alcohol when still over the limit would all be legitimate targets for tailored campaigns.

Differing messages would also be appropriate for use with different age groups. Targeting is made harder in this case because the numbers drink-driving are relatively low and are spread across different types of drivers. To some extent, targeting might be determined by which groups, if any, have the most, or most serious, drink-drive related accidents.

Communications and other activities should increase the perceived level of risk around drinking and driving. If people perceive the risks to be greater then this might change the attitude that people who are caught are 'unlucky'. This can be done in a number of ways, including:

- Publicising the number of drivers who are breathalysed, rather than the number caught and charged by the police
- Communicating the numbers caught as a success, rather than a failure, of campaigns
- Introducing random testing (by which we mean giving the police the power to stop and breathalyse any driver at any time) which would significantly increase the perceived risk and influence behaviours
- Lowering the legal drink drive-limit to a less ambiguous level

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The report, "Drinking and Driving 2007: Prevalence, Decision Making and Attitudes", which is summarised in this research findings is a web only document and is available on the publications pages of the Scottish Government website at

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