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Results of the BIVV/IBSR three-yearly road safety attitude survey

Summary

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Meesmann, U. & Boets, S. (2014) *Conduite sous l'influence de l'alcool et de drogues. Résultats de la mesure d'attitudes en matière de sécurité routière menée tous les trois ans par l'IBSR*. Bruxelles, Belgique : Institut Belge pour la Sécurité Routière – Centre de connaissance Sécurité Routière.

Summary

The Belgian Institute for Road Safety (BIVV/IBSR) attitude survey is based on 1,540 interviews with drivers whose principal residence is in Belgium and who had driven a car or delivery van at least 1,500 km in the six months preceding the interview. The interviews were conducted verbally by the research agency Significant GfK in September and October 2012.

In the attitude survey, respondents were asked to provide their opinion on a number of statements. Each attitude statement was examined to determine whether or not there was a correlation between the statement and certain driver characteristics (gender, age and region). The percentages were also calculated for the different categories of answers; where possible the figures were compared with those from previous attitude surveys conducted by the BIVV/IBSR and with results from other sources. It looked for the existence of significant differences depending on the respondent's gender, age or region.

The attitude survey 2012 comprised several sections. This report only includes the results for driving under the influence of alcohol, drugs and medication.

DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF ALCOHOL

Alcohol is one of the main causes of road accidents. The risk of road accidents increases exponentially in line with the amount of alcohol consumed. When alcohol is combined with drugs or medication the risk of accidents significantly increases. The risk of accident is higher with younger drivers on consumption of the same amount of alcohol as other drivers.

Self-reported driving under the influence of alcohol

The most important findings related to driving under the influence of alcohol are:

- In 2012, 13% of the respondents said that they had driven under the influence of alcohol one or more times during the past month. This result is exactly the same as in 2009 (13%) and in 2006 (12%). In the past six years, the frequency of driving under the influence of alcohol has barely changed in Belgium. We can draw the same conclusion from the BIVV/IBSR alcohol behaviour measurement survey.
- Like most other studies about driving under the influence of alcohol, the BIVV/IBSR attitude survey shows that men (20%) are more likely to drive under the influence of alcohol than women (6%). As far as age differences are concerned, the attitude survey, like other research based on self-reported behaviour (e.g. SARTRE4), showed that drivers in the youngest age group (18-29 years: 18%) indicated most frequently that they drive under the influence of alcohol and the oldest age group (63+; 7%) the least frequently. These findings seem to contradict the results of observational studies. In every BIVV/IBSR alcohol behaviour measurement survey from 2003 until 2012, the drivers in the 40-54 age group have been consistently the worst offenders when it comes to driving under the influence of alcohol. In the DRUID roadside survey, the highest percentage of drivers under the influence of alcohol was found in the 55 and over age group. These differences can be explained for example by differences in research methodology, response behaviour or in awareness of one's own risk behaviour. The gold standard for estimating the prevalence of driving under influence is definitely the observational studies.

Attitudes to driving under the influence of alcohol

- Among those drivers who sometimes drink alcohol (74% of the total sample) the majority claim that they observe the legal limit if they still have to drive (41% do not drink if they still have to drive; 45% limit their alcohol consumption to the legal limit). 15% of the drivers risk driving with a alcohol blood level above the legally prescribed limit. The majority of this group (14%) indicate that they do limit their alcohol consumption, but do not necessarily observe the legal limit and 1% of the respondents even state that they do not pay attention to their alcohol consumption.
- Men (19%) are significantly more inclined to take a risk when it comes to driving with a blood alcohol level above the legally prescribed limit than women (10%). The 63 and over age group (5%) adopt a significantly safer attitude to drink and driving than all other age groups (18-29-year-olds: 19%; 30-38-year-olds: 16%; 39-49-year-olds: 16%; 50-62-year-olds: 18%). The Walloons

especially (21%) are at risk of driving with a blood alcohol level above the legally prescribed limit due to their attitude to driving under the influence of alcohol, (Brussels-Capital region: 16%; Flemings 13%).

Practical knowledge of the legislation on driving under the influence of alcohol

- The percentage of drivers that overestimates the number of standard units allowed (more than 2 glasses) has dropped in 2012 (7%) compared with 2009 (11%) but this difference is not significant.
- Men (9%) indicate significantly more frequently than women (5%) that they can drink more than the two standard units and still remain under the legally prescribed limit. This gender difference needs to be qualified however. Factors such as body weight for example mean that men can effectively drink more and still observe the legal limit.

Opinions on the risk perception of driving under the influence of alcohol

- Nine out of ten drivers (more with women than with men) are generally aware that drinking results in an increased risk of accident.
- Women are more aware of the risk of accidents due to driving under the influence of alcohol than men. The oldest age group especially is of the opinion that driving under the influence of alcohol strongly increases the risk of an accident (97%; significantly different to: 18 to 29-year olds: 92%; 50 to 62-year olds: 89%). The Walloons especially (36%) are of the opinion that the risk of accident is not increased by exceeding the legal limit by one unit

(Brussels-Capital Region: 33%; Flemings 28%).

Perceived social norm

- Driving under the influence of alcohol is generally perceived as being unacceptable. And yet one in two drivers think that most drivers occasionally drive under the influence of alcohol.
- Women are more likely to consider driving under the influence of alcohol as being socially unacceptable than men. The perception of the unacceptability of driving under the influence of alcohol increases with age (the older one is, the more one disapproves of friends who do so). The 50-62 age group especially is of the opinion that driving under the influence of alcohol frequently occurs (57%). The perceived social norm for driving under the influence of alcohol differs depending on the region: Walloons (78%) are significantly more frequently of the opinion that most of their friends/acquaintances think that driving under the influence of alcohol is unacceptable than Flemings or respondents in the Brussels-Capital Region (70%). On the other hand Walloons (18%) also agree more frequently that driving under influence is acceptable if you do not have to drive far or drive on deserted roads at night in comparison with the Brussels region (13%) and Flemings (9%). The people of the Brussels- Capital Region (55%), in comparison with the Flemings (47%) and the Walloons (46%), are more frequently of the opinion that drivers who never drive under the influence of alcohol are the exception.

The acceptability of driving under the influence of alcohol

- Driving when one is uncertain whether one has exceeded the legally prescribed limit is unacceptable for most Belgian drivers (84%). Compared with 2009, the figures relating to the acceptability of driving under influence have barely changed (same rank order, compared with other dangerous driving behaviours).
- Men (5%) consider driving under the influence of alcohol to be significantly more acceptable than women (2%). Young drivers (18-29-year olds; 7%) consider driving, when one is uncertain of whether one has exceeded the legally prescribed limit, to be significantly more acceptable than drivers in the 30-38 and 50 and over age groups (30-38-year olds: 3%; 50- 62-year-olds: 3%). In the Brussels-Capital Region respondents (6%) consider driving under the influence of alcohol to be significantly more acceptable in comparison with Flemings (3%; Walloons: 4%).

Subjective assessment of alcohol as a cause of accidents

- Belgian drivers consider driving under the influence of alcohol to be the second most important cause of road accidents. They estimate that alcohol plays an important role in half of all road

accidents (51%) (ranked second in the list of 16 causes of road accidents). In the three successive attitude surveys (2006, 2009 and 2012), speeding and driving under the influence of alcohol were consistently considered to be the most important causes of road accidents.

- In the Brussels region, respondents estimated that 55% of all accidents are caused through alcohol consumption, which is significantly higher compared with the Walloons (47%; Flemings 50%).

DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF DRUGS AND MEDICATION

Psychoactive substances can have a negative impact on the ability to drive. For this reason, driving under the influence of drugs and medication is generally considered to be a risk to road safety (for example: DRUID, SWOV; 2011). The relative risk of serious accidents greatly varies depending on the specific substance. There is a moderately increased risk of serious accidents for cannabis, an average increased risk for cocaine, illegal opiates, benzodiazepines, Z drugs and medical opiates and a greatly increased risk for amphetamines and the combined use of different types of drugs and/or medication (Gadegbeku et al., 2010).

Self-reported driving under the influence of drugs

- Only 2% of the respondents (32 individuals) indicate that they consumed one or more drugs before having to drive in the past year. Almost all of these respondents stated that they had used cannabis¹.
- Men and young drivers more frequently indicate that they use drugs before having to drive, compared with women and older drivers.

Opinions about the risk perception of driving under the influence of drugs

- There is a strong awareness of the risk of driving under the influence of drugs: the vast majority of the respondents (95%) is of the opinion that driving under the influence of drugs greatly increases the risk of an accident. For alcohol, 94% of the respondents communicated this opinion. Only 12% of the respondents is of the opinion that one knows one's own limits best when it comes to driving safely under the influence of drugs. This is clearly less than reported for alcohol (36%). This may be due to the fact that drinking alcohol is a widespread habit (with which the majority of the respondents have experience) in comparison with drug abuse, making it more difficult to estimate the effects.
- The 63 and over age group (98%) believe significantly more often than 18-29-year olds (90%), 30-48-year olds (94%) and 50-62-year olds (93%) that driving under the influence of drugs greatly increases the risk of an accident. We found no significant differences between men and women.

Perceived social norm

- 90% of the respondents indicate that most of their friends/acquaintances consider driving under the influence of drugs unacceptable. This was clearly less than for alcohol, where 71% of the respondents indicated this to be unacceptable.
- Men (88%) are significantly less frequently of the opinion than women (92%) that most of their friends/acquaintances consider driving under the influence of drugs unacceptable. The number of respondents who indicate that most of their friends/acquaintances consider driving under the influence of drugs unacceptable increases in line with age.

Acceptability of driving under the influence of drugs

- According to Belgian drivers driving under the influence of drugs is the most unacceptable form of risk behaviour. Less than 1% of the drivers find this behaviour acceptable.

Subjective assessment of drugs and medication as a cause of road accidents

¹ It should be pointed out that these self-reported figures are susceptible to the influence of social desirability (see also Boulanger, 2010 and Devil et al., 2011), even more than is the case for driving under the influence of alcohol

- Belgian car drivers estimate that 42% of all road accidents are caused by drugs (ranked fifth in the list of 16 possible causes of road accidents). By contrast, the use of medication is considered to be the cause in 32% of road accidents (placed 13th in the list of 16 causes), which is rather low in the ranking. In any event, this indicates that Belgian drivers consider drug abuse to be a greater risk of road accidents than the use of medication. The risk assessment of drugs and medication has barely changed throughout the various BIVV/ISBR attitude surveys.
- Young drivers (18 to 29-year-olds) estimate the percentage of accidents (37%) caused by drugs to be significantly lower than 39 to 49-year-olds and respondents in the 63 and over age group (each 44%). The estimated percentage of accidents caused by psychoactive medication is lower among young drivers (18-29-year olds: 26%) than in all the other age groups (30-38: 32%; 39-49: 34%; 50-62: 34%; 63+ 32%). In the Brussels-Capital region, respondents estimate the percentage of road accidents caused by driving under the influence of drugs to be significantly higher (49%) than Flemish (40%) or Walloon drivers (39%). The respondents in the Brussels region (35%) also estimate the percentage to be significantly higher for driving under the influence of medication than the Walloons (27%). Flemish drivers take a midway position with 31%. We were unable to find any significant gender differences in the subjective assessment of drugs and medication as a cause of road accidents.

CONCLUSION ON DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE

The reported behaviours and opinions indicate that driving under the influence of alcohol is still a widespread practice and a common social phenomenon. Men especially, but also young male and female drivers, are the problem groups that awareness campaigns should focus on. Social acceptability and the respondent's social environment² are good starting points.

Compared with alcohol, driving under the influence of drugs is unacceptable for almost all Belgian drivers (99%) and only 2% of all Belgian drivers indicate that they have driven under the influence of drugs in the past year (especially young men, and cannabis)³

We determined that very little is known about driving under the influence of medication. We know very little about this issue in Belgium or about the underlying attitudes of medication users. In view of the fact that people regularly drive under the influence of medication (Isalberti et al., 2011), the increased risk of road accidents (Gadegbeku et al., 2010) and the low risk perception of Belgian drivers, we conclude that there clearly is still a considerable margin for improvement. The awareness of Belgian drivers needs to be raised concerning the risks of driving under the influence of medication.

NEED FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

On the basis of the results of this study and the current status of academic research, the BIVV/IBSR calls for further research in the following areas:

- Continuation of the attitude surveys concerning driving under the influence.
- Conduct behaviour measurement surveys in these areas.
- Widen the scope of research to include driving under the influence of medication (prevalence and underlying behavioural determinants).
- In-depth research into the attitudes of individuals who consume drugs.

² Further results regarding alcohol controls and penalties are discussed in the separate report "Handhaving en draagvlak voor maatregelen. Resultaten van de driejaarlijkse attitudemeting over verkeersveiligheid van het BIVV".

³ It should be pointed out that these self-reported figures are susceptible to the influence of desirability (see also Boulanger, 2010 and Devil et al., 2011), even more than is the case for driving under the influence of alcohol.



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