

A follow up sample of first time drink driving offenders: How many drink drive post offence?

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Abstract

Background

Drink driving remains an important issue to address in terms of health and injury prevention even though research shows that over time there has been a steady decline in drink driving. This has been attributed to the introduction of countermeasures such as random breath testing (RBT), changing community attitudes and norms leading to less acceptance of the behaviour and, to a lesser degree, the implementation of programs designed to deter offenders from engaging in drink driving. Most of the research to date has focused on the hard core offenders - those with high blood alcohol content at the time of arrest, and those who have more than one offence.

Aims

There has been little research on differences within the first offender population or on factors contributing to second offences. This research aims to fill the gap by reporting on those factors in a sample of offenders.

Methods

This paper reports on a study that involved interviewing 198 first offenders in court and following up this group 6-8 months post offence. Of these original participants, 101 offenders were able to be followed up, with 88 included in this paper on the basis that they had driven a vehicle since the offence.

Results

Interestingly, while the rate of reported apprehended second offences was low in that time frame (3%), a surprising number of offenders reported that they had driven under the influence at a much higher rate (27%). That is a large proportion of first offenders were willing to risk the much larger penalties associated with a second offence in order to engage in drink driving.

Discussion and conclusions

Key characteristics of this follow up group are examined to inform the development of a evidence based brief intervention program that targets first time offenders with the goal of decreasing the rate of repeat drink driving.

Introduction

Alcohol use is a significant public health issue in Australia with major implications for road safety. In Australia, over the last decade between 2000 and 2010 on average some 1600 people died annually as a result of traffic accidents (Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development & Local Government, 2010) and more than a third of fatal crashes involve drivers or riders who have a Breath Alcohol Concentration (BAC) of 0.05 gms/100ml or greater (National Road Safety Council, 2010). A proportion of the general population have also admitted to avoiding arrest while drinking and driving (Watson & Freeman, 2007). While there has been research into the 'high range' and 'repeat' drink drivers, little work has been done to explore the characteristics of first time offenders. It is known that offenders typically are not first time drink drivers but rather 'first time apprehended', in that most have engaged in drink driving in the years leading to the first conviction (Wilson, Palk, & Sheehan, 2010).

This paper follows 88 first time drink driving offenders who were interviewed at the time of court mention and followed up 6-8 months following the court hearing. Of the offenders, 27% reported to have driven over the limit in the time between initial contact and follow up. The paper provides a brief overview of some key characteristics of first offenders who engaged in drink driving following conviction and those who didn't, providing suggestions on how to target those at high risk for the behaviour and subsequent offending.

Methodology

Participants

A sample of 88 first time drink driving offenders was obtained from a larger sample of offenders who had been previously interviewed at the time of court offence. These offenders had taken part in an interview directly following their court hearing for the first time offence in the Brisbane or Maroochydore Magistrates Court, in Queensland. These courts have assigned traffic offender hearings on specific days. Offenders provided consent to follow them up 6-8 months following the offence by phone or email.

Procedure

In the 6-8 months following the offence, participants were contacted by email or telephone and subsequently completed a brief questionnaire, either online or by phone interview, about their behaviours following the original index offence, including whether they had been apprehended for drink driving, or were drink driving without being apprehended.

Results

The data was analysed using the PASW Statistics 18 program for Windows. This was done firstly by examining frequency distributions, and then bivariate comparisons were made using chi-square analysis to identify differences between those who self reported drink driving at follow up and those who didn't. Ordinal variables were measured with the linear-by-linear option. Key variables were derived from the initial interview with offenders, which included demographics, offence information, and risky alcohol use as measured by the AUDIT questionnaire. The AUDIT is a measure of harmful alcohol consumption, and has been validated in a study using patients from six countries (World Health Organisation). As per the guidelines, a cutoff score of 8 or more is used in this study to indicate a strong likelihood of hazardous or harmful alcohol consumption.

Of the 101 offenders in the follow up, 88 are used in subsequent analyses of data (on the basis that they had reported driving a vehicle in the last 6 months). While it appears a high number had not driven in the 6-8 months post first offence, the period of licence disqualification for some offenders was larger than the period of follow up. Of the sample of 88 offenders, 27% of offenders self reported drink driving in the follow up period. Within the same time frame, only 3% reported that they had been apprehended for an offence. The following results provide comparative information about the offenders who self reported drink driving (27%) compared to the rest of the sample who reported no drink driving in the follow up period (73%).

Table 1 below provides demographic information about the offenders who self reported drink driving compared to the rest of the follow up sample.

Table 1: Demographics of follow up sample of first time drink driving offenders who self reported drink driving compared to those who did not self report drink driving

Demographic characteristics and self reported drink driving in the 6 months post conviction		
	No	Yes
Gender		
Male	47 (73.5%)	20 (83.0%)
Female	17 (26.5%)	4 (17.0%)
Age groups		
17-25	28 (43.8%)	15 (62.5%)
26-39	26 (40.6%)	6 (25.0%)
40+	10 (15.6%)	3 (12.5%)
Level of education		
Year 10	9 (14.1%)	5 (20.8%)
Year 12	25 (39.1%)	10 (41.7%)
Cert/Diploma	16 (25.0%)	6 (25.0%)
Bachelor/Postgraduate	14 (21.8%)	3 (12.5%)
Marital Status		
Single	39 (60.9%)	17 (70.8%)
Married/de facto	22 (34.4%)	5 (20.8%)
Other (div, sep, wid)	3 (4.7%)	2 (8.4%)
Employed		
No	14 (21.9%)	5 (20.8%)
Yes	50 (78.1%)	19 (79.2%)

The data showed a trend in the expected direction, in that the majority of those who self reported drink driving were male, young, educated, single and employed. However, there were no significant differences between self reported drink driving and the demographic characteristics. It must be noted that the small sampling population may be a reason for non-significance in this instance.

Table 2 shows other key characteristics of offenders at first conviction, including driving history, BAC level, method of apprehension, and alcohol use as measured by the AUDIT questionnaire.

Table 2: Other key characteristics

Driving history, BAC, apprehension and alcohol use and self reported drink driving in the 6 months post conviction		
	No	Yes
Driving history		
Up to 5 years*	13 (20.3%)	11 (45.8%)
5-10 years	18 (28.1%)	4 (16.7%)
10+ years	33 (51.6%)	9 (37.5%)
BAC when apprehended		
0.01-0.05	3 (4.7%)	1 (4.2%)
0.051-0.10	38 (59.4%)	16 (66.7%)
0.101-0.15	18 (28.1%)	5 (20.8%)
0.151 +	5 (7.8%)	2 (8.3%)
Method of apprehension		
RBT	50 (78.1%)	21 (87.5%)
Method of driving	14 (21.9%)	3 (12.5%)
Alcohol use		
Non-risky	21 (32.8%)	3 (12.5%)
Risky	43 (67.2%)	21 (87.5%)

The above table demonstrates the key characteristics examined for this report. The chi-square test of independence found that those offenders who self reported drink driving in the months following conviction were likely to have less driving experience $X^2 (2, N = 88) = 3.82, p=0.051$. There was also a trend which demonstrates that risky drinkers were more likely to engage in drink driving $X^2 (1, N = 88) = 3.63, p=0.065$. While not significant, the trends are in the expected direction.

Conclusions

There are a number of participants in the current study who continued to drink and drive following their initial drink drive offence and court appearance. There was little evidence of differences between demographic characteristics of those who continued to drink and drive and those who didn't. This research demonstrated that within a defined geographic area a significant number of participant offenders (27%) admitted to engaging in drink driving in the 6 months post index offence, and of these offenders, those with a limited driving history under 5 years were the most at risk of drink driving. Risky drinking also clearly contributes to subsequent drink driving. The study used a small sample size therefore results should be interpreted as such. Should these results be replicated in future studies especially across a broader geographic areas and with higher participant numbers there will be implications for both criminal justice and health. The use of alcohol ignition interlocks may be indicated for early convicted drink drivers, and the reduction of drinking for 'at risk' offenders may be a way to decrease subsequent drink driving. In terms of developing an intervention program targeted at first offenders, one key component should be addressing risky alcohol use.

References

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