

Drink Driving Fact Sheet

Drink driving in the EU?

Driving whilst under the influence of alcohol contributes annually to at least 10,000 deaths on EU roads. In the EU as a whole, around 2-3% of journeys are associated with an illegal Blood Alcohol Limit (BAC), resulting in 30-40% of driver deaths (ESCAPE 2003, ETSC 2003). A minor reduction of driving under the influence of alcohol would have a large effect on collision occurrence.

In Europe as a whole, reductions in drink driving deaths have been more substantial over the last decade than reductions in other areas such as speeding on the roads (ETSC PIN Annual Report 2007)(1). The reductions have been most impressive in the Czech Republic, Belgium and Germany where drink driving deaths have decreased by more than 10% every year on average over the period 1996 to 2005. In Hungary, Lithuania, Finland, Spain and Great Britain, on the other hand, the drink driving problem has become worse (see Fig 1).

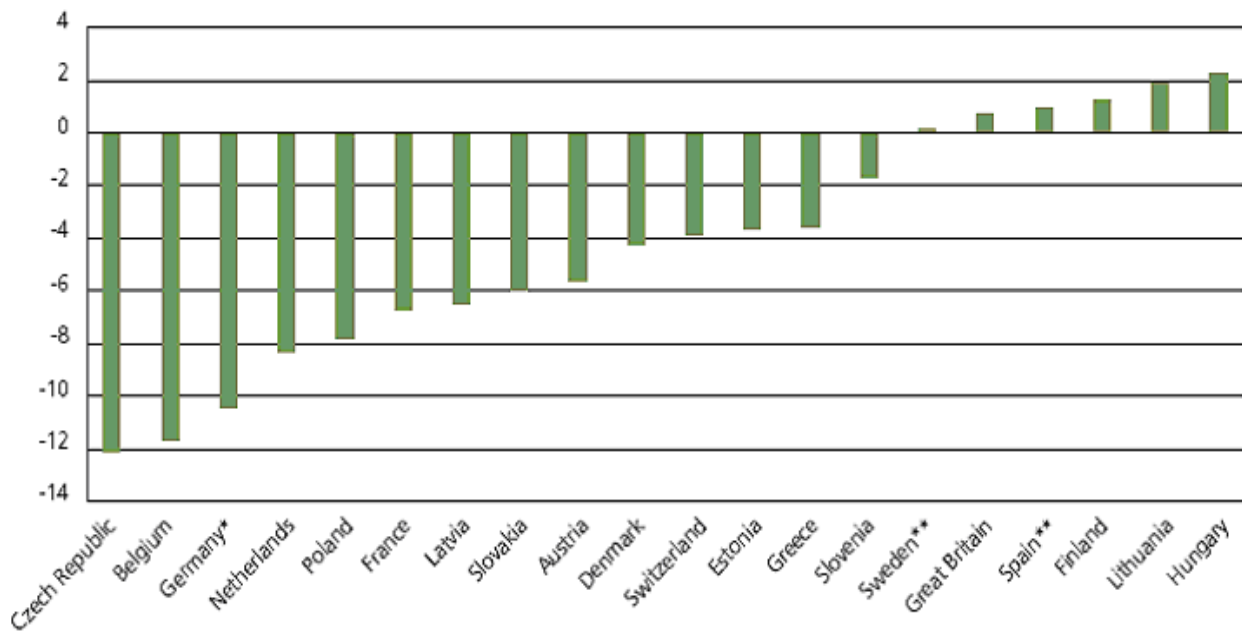


Fig 1 Average yearly percentage change in road deaths resulting from crashes related to drink driving between 1996-1998 and 2005. Source: national data

* Average yearly percentage change in drivers involved in fatal drink driving crashes (Germany)

** Average yearly percentage change in driver deaths from drink driving crashes (Spain, Sweden)

What are the effects of alcohol on driving performance?

These range from anaesthesia after large amounts of alcohol to impairment of behavioural and cognitive capabilities after small doses. Alcohol may also decrease motivation to comply with safety standards, which may result in an active search for dangerous situations (such as competitive behaviour, or excessive speed). In general, all functions which are important in the safe operation of a motor vehicle can be affected by the levels of alcohol well below current legal limits operating in EU countries. There is wide agreement amongst medical and professional experts that a BAC of 0.5 is the highest level that should be permitted.

Who drinks and drives?

The association between driving and drinking is typically a masculine phenomenon. Roughly two subpopulations of drivers are concerned: young male drivers (under 25 years), and more experienced male drivers (25-40 years). The second group appears to represent the main stake in terms of collision involvement.

How to tackle drink driving?

A maximum legal limit

At the core of the measures there is the legal blood alcohol limit for drivers. The European Commission has recommended a European-wide blood alcohol limit not exceeding 0.5g/l for all drivers and 0.2g/l for novice and professional drivers. More and more countries are following this advice (see Fig 2). Cyprus lowered its 0.9g/l BAC limit to 0.5g/l in 2006. France recently lowered its BAC limit for drivers of buses and coaches, and the Netherlands introduced in 2006 a BAC limit of 0.2 g/l for novice drivers. In Germany, the government decided in February 2007 to lower the limit for novice drivers. Luxembourg lowered its legal limit to 0.5 BAC for the majority of drivers, and reduced the level even further to 0.2 BAC for novice and professional drivers in October 2007. Only three countries still have 0.8 BAC limit: the UK, Ireland and Malta (0.8).

Legal Blood Alcohol Limit in the EU-27

	BAC	BAC Public transport	BAC Commercial drivers	BAC Novice/probationary Drivers
Austria	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.1
Belgium	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Bulgaria	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Cyprus	0.5	0.2 (planned)	0.2 (planned)	0.2 (planned)
Czech Republic	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Denmark	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Estonia	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Finland	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
France	0.5	0.2	0.5	0.5
Germany	0.5	0.5	0.0*	0.0
Greece	0.5	0.2	0.2	0.2
Hungary	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Ireland	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8
Italy	0.5	0.2	0.5	0.5
Latvia	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.2
Lithuania	0.4	0.4	0.4	0.4
Luxembourg	0.5	0.5	0.2	0.2
Malta	0.9	0.9	0.9	0.9
Netherlands	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.2
Poland	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
Portugal	0.5	0.5	0.5	0.5
Romania	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Slovakia	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Slovenia	0.5	0.0	0.0	0.0
Spain	0.5	0.3	0.3	0.3
Sweden	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2
United Kingdom	0.8	0.8	0.8	0.8

*Dangerous goods vehicles only

Source: ETSC, European Commission, ICAP, ACI.

A recent Eurobarometer survey has shown that in most countries just over half of the respondents know what the legal BAC limit for drivers is in their country. However in countries with a high legal BAC, such as Ireland and the U.K., the majority of respondents replied "don't know" to this question, which is cause for concern.

European Commission (2007) Attitudes towards alcohol.

In a driver survey carried out in 2002 in 23 countries, on average 5% of interviewed drivers declared to drive after having drunk 'one day or more during the past week'. The survey found striking differences between geographical areas. In Southern European countries, 13% of the drivers declared to drive while over the limit. In Northern countries this was 0.2%, while in Western and Eastern countries 4% of the drivers declared to drive after drinking. (SARTRE 3, 2004).

A legal limit for young drivers

Some countries have introduced a lower legal limit, usually 0.2 g/l, for this group of drivers. Available evaluation studies show a substantial reduction in alcohol related deaths in those age groups where such a limit has been introduced. In the newly adopted (October 2006) Commission Communication on an EU strategy the Commission invites the Member States to consider a zero BAC limit for young and novice drivers. Almost 3/4s of European surveyed would agree to a lower BAC level for young and novice drivers of 0.2 (Eurobarometer 2007).

Police Enforcement

Enforcement procedures differ throughout the Union as does the chance of being breathalysed. Increasing drivers' perception of the risk of being detected for excess alcohol is a very important element in any package of measures to reduce alcohol related crashes. The European Commission had a cost-benefit analysis undertaken which found that with increased enforcement of drink driving, 3,900 deaths could be prevented in the EU 15 (ICF 2003).

The European Commission adopted a Recommendation in October 2004 (EC 2004) on how Member States should improve their traffic law enforcement policies. In November 2006 the European Commission published its public consultation "Respecting the Rules: Better Road Safety Enforcement in the EU" on the enforcement of road traffic law. The Recommendation clearly states that if enforcement policies have not improved sufficiently across the Member States, the Commission reserves the right to propose more binding legislation, such as a Directive. This is expected in 2008.

Follow Up of Offences

Penalties for excess alcohol differ across Member States, but generally range from heavy fines to prison sentences and are often combined with periods of disqualification or rehabilitation courses. Research indicates that disqualification from driving after failing an evidentiary breath test or failure to take a breath test may deter drinking drivers, probably for reasons of the swiftness and certainty of the punishment.

In many countries driver improvement courses have been available to offenders for a number of years, those relating to drink driving being most common.

The winning combination..EU strategy to reduce alcohol-related harm

There is ample evidence that reductions in BAC limits, supported by effective enforcement and publicity, can reduce drink driving at all BAC levels. Recent changes in Switzerland once again confirm this. In Switzerland, the number of road deaths decreased by an estimated 20% from 2004 to 2005. Preliminary findings show that one of the main reasons for this is a 25% reduction in alcohol-related deaths in 2005. On 1 January 2005, the legal BAC limit was reduced from 0.8 to 0.5 g/l and random breath testing was introduced.

EU strategy to reduce alcohol-related harm

On 26 October 2006, the European Commission published a Strategy on Alcohol-related Harm Reduction. It focuses on preventing and cutting back heavy and extreme drinking patterns, as well as under-age drinking, and some of their most harmful consequences, in particular alcohol-related road collisions. The Strategy proposes the dissemination of good practices already implemented in some Member States such as setting lower or zero BAC limits for young and professional drivers and unrestricted (random) breath testing for all drivers.

Technical fix – the Alcohol Interlock

An alcohol interlock is a breath-testing device connected to the vehicle. It is not possible to start the vehicle unless the driver has done a breath test. The driver has to provide a breath sample every time the individual attempts to start the vehicle. If the system indicates a breath alcohol concentration over the threshold level it prevents the driver from driving (Willis et al, 2004). Experiences in the US and Canada have shown that alcohol interlocks can lead to 40-95% reductions in the rate of drink driving repeat offences (ICADTS, 2001). But there is a need to investigate how to prevent recidivism which risks occurring as soon as the alcohol interlock is removed. For example with follow up and support to the driver. Companies may be the driving force to develop and implement alcohol interlock systems on the market due to their policies, strategies and purchasing procedures.

Getting home..

Many drink-driving offences occur after visits to the pub, the restaurant or to other establishments for leisure activities. In order to decrease the number of occasions in which alcohol might become a problem extra public transport and changes in the location of discos and other social establishments closer to where people live might help to decrease the number of opportunities for drink-driving. Ireland calls it reaching the target audience with their campaign activities at the 'point of danger' where they are considering how they are going to get home be it in a pub washroom or leaving a rugby stadium. Countries in the EU have continued to campaign actively in this field. At a European level the Eurobob campaign which promoted the idea of a designated driver was co-financed for a period of 5 years by the European Commission.

Reaching out to the public..campaigns..

Many countries still run this campaign at a national level with local initiatives which also promote the concept. Nuit Européenne Sans Accident (NESA) European Nights without accidents) is also a European wide campaign still being financed by the EC to make young drivers aware of the influence of alcohol.

EU funded research also continues to search for new solutions and promote best practice:

- Alcolock project (completed)
- ANDREA – Analysis of Driver Rehabilitation Programmes (completed)
- RSPI Road Safety performance Indicators 2004-2008
- PEPPER - Police Enforcement Policy and Programmes on European Roads 2006-2008
- DRUID Driving Impairments due to alcohol, drugs and medicine 2006-2009
- CAST Campaigns and Awareness-raising strategies in Traffic Safety 2006-2008

(1) ETSC PIN Annual Report (June 2007), Chapter 3 Reducing deaths from drink driving. www.etsc.be/documents/PIN_Report.pdf