

France: New Legislation to Tackle Alcohol as Main Cause of Road Deaths

Introduction

France is first in the EU for cutting the most road deaths between 2001 and 2007 achieving a 43% reduction. France has made exemplary progress since 2001 in reducing deaths on its roads and is not letting up the pressure either. This represents the best progress of any EU country over this period. Alongside political will from the highest level came a new policy of "Zero Tolerance" of speeding offences and the introduction of a fully automated speed management system.

Following on from the French government's previous policy to "fight against road violence" earlier this year President Sarkozy proposed a whole raft of new measures to tackle deaths on the roads. For combating drink driving this includes the introduction of alcolock rehabilitation programmes and alcolocks in all school buses. Stronger sanctions including car confiscation are also on the cards for those found to be much over the limit. France has also set itself a new target. It is aiming to reach a target of no more than 3,000 deaths per year by 2012. In 2007 4,620 people lost their lives on French roads.

Drink Driving in France

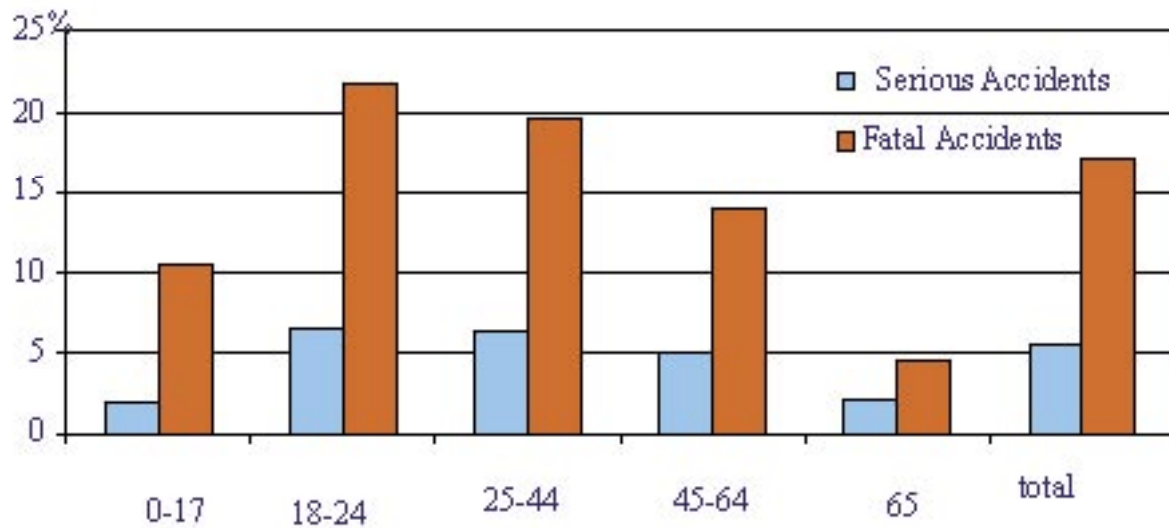
In France, driving while under the influence of alcohol is now the main factor in accidents ahead of speeding. The proportion of accidents causing death involving alcohol was 29% in 2007 (Observatoire National Interministériel de Sécurité Routière 2007).

The maximum permissible BAC limit is 0.5 with 0.2 for bus drivers. Some voices have been calling in the past year for a lower limit for young drivers. Although critics of this stress that instead it would be better to ensure the real respect of the existing limit and increasing the probability of being detected and proposing medical rehabilitation for drivers who are heavily under the influence of alcohol. Figure 1 shows the change in alcohol as a cause of road deaths up to 2006 (OECD/ITF 2008).

Figure 1 Evolution in the number of drink driving offences, and the percentage of road deaths where alcohol is a causation factor.

	1980	1994	2000	2003	2006
Number of drink driving offences	N/A	100 000	125 000	130 000	150 200 (2005)
% of road deaths where alcohol is a factor		32%	30%	31%	28%

Figure 2. Driver deaths according to age.



Source: Observatoire National Interministériel de Sécurité Routière 2008

Figure 2 shows that although deaths amongst the young age group 18-24 are highest, there are still high levels of deaths in the next age group 25-44 and again nearly 15% in the 45-64 age group.

Moreover, research has also found that the road safety problem may mask another problem: high levels of alcohol. In crashes involving injuries average levels of alcohol in drivers involved were found to be 1.7 g/l and for collisions resulting in deaths more than 80% of drivers were over 1.2 g/l.

New proposals to take action include:

- reinforcing the efficiency of the Medical Commissions on driving licences to help them carry out their duty to ensure that there is a real follow up of drivers, and ensuring this is reflected at regional and national level.
- proceeding systematically with a mixed approach to include the doctor in analysing drink driving recidivists after they get back their driving licences to better understand the cause of their drink driving.
- training for general medical doctors involved in road safety on alcohol and addiction especially on brief interventions and early identification.
- developing awareness raising training sessions specially on alcohol for the offenders.
- introducing alcohol interlocks in the administrative and judicial context.
- improving the effectiveness of the suspension or ban of driving licences by consulting neighbours or confiscating the vehicle.
- within the judiciary framework develop medical treatment of the short intervention type that has proven to be effective for new heavy drinkers and reinforce the structures realised under the medical psychological and social treatment for addicted people under the medical responsibility. (Alcohol and Accidentology J.P. Assailly INRETS)

Attitudes Amongst the Young on Drink Driving in France

Drink driving was evaluated as the most dangerous of driving behaviours in all countries in a recent survey which polled approximately 4,800 young drivers aged between 18 and 25 years in 8 EU countries including France. The survey was commissioned by the French Association Prévention

Routière and the French Insurers (FFSA). During the last evening out one in four young French drove after drinking and one in ten drove after having had more than two glasses. The campaign shows that 92% of young French think about designating a driver before going out (one of the highest levels in the EU). The highest level of French young people have also used an ethylo-test (42% in comparison to the 17% average in the other countries). Young French drivers support more police enforcement as the most effective measure (30%).

New Legislation for Drink Driving

The French government proposed new legislation to combat drink driving on 13th of February 2008. Since 2006, alcohol has become the number one contributor to road crashes: if all drivers respected the 0.5 BAC limit 26% more lives could be saved. The package of measures covers different areas of road safety including alcohol. Rehabilitation programmes will be introduced with the installation of mandatory alcolocks for a fixed period for drink drivers. Association Prévention Routière has already run a pilot programme in the Haute Savoie region. They reported a four to five level lower rate of recidivism amongst those who had participated in the alcolock programme than others who had not participated. In December 2008 this programme was rolled out to four other French regions. This new proposal would envisage extending this to the rest of France. Earlier this year the Government also took a decision that all school buses will have to have alcolocks from the start of the new school year in 2009 onwards. This is seen as a first step towards rolling out alcohol interlocks to other target groups.

The highest level of people killed in drink driving related crashes in France are from the 18 to 24 age group. The government has proposed that night clubs must install 'alcotests' so that drivers have the opportunity to test their BAC level before driving. Lastly the sale of alcohol will be prohibited in all petrol stations 24 hours a day. At present the sale is only allowed between 6 am and 10 pm.

The proposal is making its way through the legislative progress and is due for adoption in March 2009.

Drink Driving Enforcement

Breath tests are taken at random, during large scale awareness police operations and on suspicion, following a collision or a traffic offence. Every traffic police officer (in the Police and the Gendarmerie) is dedicated to the enforcement of drink-driving. The number of preventative breath tests increased from 7.9 million in 2004 to just under 9 million in 2007. Offences went up from 264 223 in 2006 to 276 452 in 2007. In 2005, the number of drink driving controls was increased by another 11%, and targeted actions delivered a higher score of detections. This follows an increasing number of alcohol testing devices available to the police, including the easily transportable model.

Under the new legislation in the field of enforcement the government will also ask each French region to prepare an enforcement plan showing where and when activities will be undertaken to prevent the most serious offences responsible for crashes such as alcohol, speed and seat belt use. The results of these enforcement plans will also be analysed and published.

Follow-up of Drink Driving offences

Drink driving offences are at the top of driving offences in terms of numbers in France. In the case of following up a drink driving offence in the court there are variations and there is a graduated

approach to penalties. The level of fine and possible confiscation of the car depends on the interpretation of the judge, although a driver will always lose 6 penalty points. Some Police officers and gendarmes with broader judicial power (“officiers de police judiciaire”) have extended power to carry out random drink-driving checks on the road. According to the Expert Interministerial Committee on Road Safety’s Report of July 2007 France should introduce a follow up of drink driving offenders that would involve the medical community in driving licence suspension. Driving licence suspension/ban should be made more efficient together with the Police. The legal framework should develop an early identification mechanism and act quickly. It should also reinforce the structure to realise a medical psychological social care for alcoholics.

The new proposal includes plans for a tightening of sanctions with the introduction of a supplementary penalty of confiscating the car from the driver in the case of certain offences including recidivist drink driving.

Information Campaigns and Driver Training

Hard hitting awareness campaigns are run by different governmental and non-governmental bodies on drink driving and the implementation of the new enforcement strategy has been accompanied by extensive media coverage. France also conducted the Belgian-modelled “Capitaine de soirée” campaign. Other anti-drink driving campaigns including TV spots, posters, stickers and leaflets are also organised during the year. Self-testing devices are distributed as part of campaigns. Locally drink driving enforcement activities are announced in the press, they often target young people exiting discos, bars, raves and clubs.

In the past year the Association Prévention Routière has collected 36,000 signatures as part of a campaign to stop young people from drinking and driving. The signatories support three key measures: 1) putting alco-tests in all places where alcohol is sold or consumed, 2) forbidding sponsorship of student evenings by alcohol producers and respecting the law for the sale of alcohol to minors and selling alcohol at night, 3) introducing alco-interlocks in school buses and developing their use for repeat drink driving offenders.

There is a need to apply informal measures such as changing the social conditions and the environment in which youngsters are growing up including crucially the influence of the family.

Another important entry point is to highlight the influence of alcohol during driver training. One way of envisaging this could be to introduce alcolocks in all driving schools.

According to the Expert Committee Report of July 2007, campaigns should not only be targeting young people. As can be seen from the above Figure 1 drink driving deaths are occurring also in the older age groups.

Conclusion

France has proven itself as the frontrunner in reducing road deaths in the EU since 2001. Its efforts so far have mainly, but not exclusively, focussed on speeding. Now it is time to progress swiftly in advancing the new initiatives to put an end to the high levels of drink driving. Here too France can be a pioneer that can inspire others in Europe to follow.

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