

# Self-Reported Drinking and Driving Practices and Attitudes in Four Countries and Perceptions of Enforcement

A.F. Williams, S.A. Ferguson, and M.X. Cammisa

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Arlington, Virginia, USA

## Abstract

A telephone survey of 2,251 drivers was conducted to compare self-reported behavior and attitudes regarding alcohol consumption and driving in the United States with Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom. U.S. respondents were less likely to say they drank and reportedly drank smaller quantities. Drivers were most likely to have been checked for alcohol in Australia (82 percent). Respondents supported tough penalties; 45-60 percent thought current penalties not tough enough. Forty-two percent in the United States, 26 percent in Australia, 35 percent in Canada, and 47 percent in the United Kingdom thought police were not doing enough enforcement. Results indicate that there is public tolerance for vigorous enforcement of tough laws and that increased enforcement in the United States and elsewhere would be an acceptable means of addressing the problem of alcohol-impaired driving.

*Keywords:* Enforcement, laws, alcohol-impaired driving

## Introduction

In the decade of the 1980s and into the 1990s, industrialized countries achieved major reductions in crashes involving alcohol-impaired driving. In the United States, for example, the percentage of fatally injured drivers with blood alcohol concentrations at or greater than 0.10 percent dropped from 47 percent in 1980 to 38 percent in 1990 and 28 percent in 1998.<sup>1</sup> Substantial declines have occurred in many other industrialized countries during this period, including the other major English-speaking countries — Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Because of differences in data collection methods and computational techniques, the numbers for each country cannot be compared directly, but the global pattern of reductions in crashes associated with alcohol-impaired driving is evident and impressive.

Despite these gains the problem remains serious worldwide, and further progress in combating alcohol-impaired driving is needed. Questions to be considered include what can we learn from the past two decades about which alcohol policies work best so that they can be implemented more consistently, and what can countries learn from each other in this regard? Unfortunately, comparisons among countries often have produced confusion rather than clarity. For example, research in the United States indicated that raising the alcohol purchase age to 21 significantly reduced alcohol-related crashes among young drivers in the United States during the 1980s, but Canada experienced equivalent reductions during this period without similar changes in alcohol purchase age laws.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the differences between countries that often are cited as important are more illusory than real. For example, there is a fairly widespread perception in the United States that tough penalties are the key to reducing alcohol-impaired driving and that Scandinavian and other European countries such as Germany have been more successful than the United States because of their tough penalties. In reality, the United States has penalties that are as tough as those in most developed countries.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of deterrence theory, meaningful penalties are important (as long as they are not so severe that they are rarely applied), but the essential component is creating a public perception that the likelihood of offenders being detected and arrested is high. There may well be differences among countries in the extent to which this goal is achieved. Some countries have enforcement styles that cannot be duplicated elsewhere. For example, the Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution has been interpreted as prohibiting police from doing random breath testing as is done in Australia, although sobriety checkpoints, with specified procedures for stopping and evaluating drivers for alcohol impairment, are used in most states. However, the impressive aspect of the Australian effort is the sheer amount of enforcement that is done, and this, along with the highly publicized nature of the enforcement, is thought to be the key factor.

Vigorous and sustained enforcement against alcohol-impaired driving ultimately depends on there being widespread public and political support for this practice. To investigate current amounts of enforcement activity and public tolerance for tough penalties and increased enforcement, a telephone survey was conducted in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The survey also obtained information on drinking and on drinking and driving practices.

### **Methods**

Computer-aided telephone interviews were conducted November 15-27, 1998, in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States with respondents who said they were age 18 or older and had a driver's license. Survey results have a margin of error of  $\pm 3.9$  percentage points for samples in Australia and the United States, and  $\pm 4.3$  percentage points for samples in Canada and the United Kingdom.

A total of 2,251 respondents completed the survey — 626 in Australia, 516 in Canada, 503 in the United Kingdom, and 606 in the United States. A random-digit-dial sample was used in each country with quotas established to ensure accurate regional and gender representation. Respondents were questioned about their attitudes and behavior with regard to drinking and driving issues and about seat belt use and laws. For more information on the sample stratification and distribution, see Cammisa et al.,<sup>5</sup> which discusses self-reported belt use and attitudes toward belt use laws and their enforcement among these respondents.

### **Results**

Respondents from North America, particularly those from the United States, were less likely to report that they drank, and U.S. drinkers reportedly drank fewer drinks per occasion than drinkers from other countries. Forty-five percent of U.S. respondents said they never drank, compared with 36 percent in Canada and 21 percent in both Australia and the United Kingdom. Nineteen percent of U.S. drinkers said they consumed three or more drinks per occasion compared with 25 percent in Australia, 27 percent in Canada, and 31 percent in the United Kingdom. This compares with per capita measures of alcohol consumption that are somewhat

higher for Australia and the United Kingdom (7.6 and 7.3 liters, respectively) than the United States (6.8 liters) or Canada (6.2 liters).<sup>6</sup>

The percentages of drinkers who said they had driven during the past year after having had too much to drink were 19 percent in Australia, 18 percent in Canada, 15 percent in the United States, and 13 percent in the United Kingdom. When these percentages were based on all respondents, results were 15 percent in Australia, 11 percent in Canada, 10 percent in the United Kingdom, and 8 percent in the United States.

**Table 1:** Number of times respondents reported being checked for alcohol by police (percent)

	Australia	Canada	United Kingdom	United States
Never	18	35	84	70
Once	17	17	8	11
Twice	18	18	5	9
Three or more	47	28	3	9
Don't know/refused	0	2	0	1

Table 1 indicates the extent to which respondents said they had been checked by the police for alcohol. Australia was by far the leader, with 82 percent reported being checked, and 47 percent saying this had happened three or more times. Canadians reported being checked much more often than respondents from the United States and the United Kingdom.

**Table 2:** Attitudes about alcohol enforcement (percent)

	Australia	Canada	United Kingdom	United States
Which should carry the greatest penalty?				
Drinking and driving	74	81	80	80
Aggressive driving	9	5	11	8
Red light running	10	6	4	6
Speeding	6	3	6	4
Other	1	5	0	2
Are police enforcing enough?				
Doing enough	65	54	43	46
Not doing enough	26	35	47	42
Doing too much	4	4	4	5
Don't know/refused	4	7	7	8
How tough are penalties?				
About right	42	36	33	38
Not tough enough	45	56	60	53
Too tough	5	3	1	4
Don't know/refused	8	5	5	5

Table 2 provides information on attitudes toward enforcement. In each country, about 80 percent thought drinking and driving should carry the highest penalty, compared with aggressive driving, red light running, and other offenses. Australians in particular and Canadians were most likely to say police were doing enough in terms of enforcement, but still there was considerable sentiment in all countries that police could be doing more. Similarly, the majority of respondents in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom and 45 percent in Australia thought current penalties were not tough enough. Very few thought the penalties were too tough.

### **Discussion**

Results generally indicate public tolerance for vigorous enforcement of tough laws. There was considerable support for tougher penalties in all four countries. Australia stands out as the country with the highest enforcement presence, with 8 of 10 respondents having been checked for alcohol at least once and more than half having been checked multiple times. This reflects the results of a roadside breath testing program so extensive that nearly one out of three Australians would be expected to be stopped and checked each year.<sup>7</sup> Australians were more likely than those in other countries to think police were doing enough enforcement and that penalties were sufficiently tough. Even so, there was substantial support for even greater enforcement than presently exists. It is notable that despite the high levels of enforcement in Australia, a sizable percentage of respondents admitted driving after having too much to drink in the past year.

The United States appears to lag in enforcement, but there is evidence that increased enforcement would be an acceptable means of addressing the problem of alcohol-impaired driving. What may be lacking is the political will to support this increased effort.

### **References**

1. Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Fatality facts: alcohol. Arlington, VA. Available: [http://www.highwaysafety.org/safety\\_facts/fatality\\_facts/alcohol.htm](http://www.highwaysafety.org/safety_facts/fatality_facts/alcohol.htm). Accessed: December 28, 1999.
2. Sweedler BM. The worldwide decline in drinking and driving – where are we now. In: Mercier-Guyon C, editor, Alcohol, Drugs, and Traffic Safety, Proceedings of the 14th International Conference, Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches en Médecine du Trafic, Annecy, France, 1997, pp 1205-1210.
3. Mayhew DR, Simpson HM. Youth and Road Crashes: Reducing the Risks from Inexperience, Immaturity, and Alcohol. Traffic Injury Research Foundation, Ottawa, Ontario, 1999.
4. Stewart K. Literature review on DWI laws in other countries. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Washington (DC) 1999, DTNH22-98-P05308.
5. Cammisa MX, Williams AF, Ferguson SA. Self-reported seat belt use in four countries. J Crash Prevention and Injury Control, in press.
6. NTC Publications Ltd. World drink trends, 1996 edition. Henley-on-Thames, Oxon, 1996.
7. McLean AJ. Decline in drink driving and alcohol related fatal crashes in Australia. Transportation Research Circular 422. Transportation Research Board, Washington (DC) 1994, pp 7-15.