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## Drink-driving: prevalence and attitudes in England and Wales 2002

Laura Brasnett

A nationally representative self-report survey (Omnibus Survey, 2002) of 1,648 people explored the prevalence and frequency of driving after drinking alcohol (both under and over the perceived legal blood alcohol concentration limit). It examined the characteristics, such as age, sex and drinking patterns, of those who drive whilst 'over the limit'. The results are reported here. The nature of drink driving behaviour is also examined to find out why some drivers choose to drive whilst over the limit. Views about how drink-driving offenders should be dealt with by the criminal justice system are also discussed. The main findings from the 2003 Crime and Justice Survey regarding the prevalence of self-reported drink-driving are also reported.

### Key points

- Nearly half (44%) of all drivers in the Omnibus Survey had driven after drinking some amount of alcohol in the previous year. One in eight drivers (12%) had driven after drinking what they believed was an 'over the limit' amount of alcohol in the previous year.
- Young men were the most likely to believe they had driven whilst 'over the limit'. Over one-quarter of 16- to 29-year-olds admitted to driving whilst 'over the limit' in the previous year. Frequent drinkers were also more likely to have driven whilst 'over the limit'.
- One in eight (13%) of all respondents (drivers and non-drivers) had been a passenger when they thought the driver was 'over the limit' in the previous year.
- People who admitted to driving whilst 'over the limit' often explained their behaviour by stating that they 'felt safe to drive' at the time, despite recognising then (or later) that they were 'over the limit'.
- Attitudes towards drink-driving, such as the risk to road safety, random breath testing and the desire for harsher penalties, were similar regardless of the level of alcohol people reported drinking before driving.
- The majority of respondents (74%) said they wanted harsher penalties for drivers caught over the limit. However, when given specific scenarios, they frequently chose a more lenient option (than those typically used), particularly for first-time offenders and those who were only slightly over the limit.
- Half of all respondents thought a person was unlikely to be caught by the police even if they drove whilst over the limit once a week for a year.

This Findings examines the prevalence of, and attitudes towards, drink-driving – this is a serious offence and has profound implications for road safety. Each year there are approximately 3,500 deaths on UK roads, of which around one in six are alcohol related (DfT, 2004a). Drink-drive fatalities have fallen by two-thirds since the late 1970s (DETR, 2000). However in 2003, provisional Department of Transport figures showed there were still 560 fatalities and 2,600 serious injuries where at least one of the drivers involved was over the legal limit (Mosedale et al., 2004).

The legal limit was established by the Road Safety Act 1967. The rate of failed or refused tests (around 13%) remained the same from 1994 to 2000. However, there has been an upturn recently – 18% failed or refused tests during 2002 (Ayres et al., 2004). Drink-driving was highlighted as a concern by the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England, which expressed a commitment to monitor drink driving trends, particularly amongst young men (Cabinet Office, 2004). Despite government advice to avoid alcohol before driving (DfT, 2004b), there is still a commonly held belief that a small amount of alcohol will not impair driving ability (Anderson and Ingram, 2001).

The findings reported here are based on:

- a nationally representative self-report survey (Omnibus Survey) which explored the prevalence and frequency of driving after drinking alcohol – both under and over the perceived blood alcohol concentration limit (BAC). It also examined the characteristics of those who drove whilst ‘over the limit’ and asked why they did so. The beliefs of drivers and non-drivers about how drink-driving offenders should be dealt with by the criminal justice system was also explored
- the 2003 Crime and Justice Survey (C&JS) which is used to present the main findings regarding the prevalence of self-reported drink driving.

The findings reported here are from the Omnibus Survey 2002 unless stated otherwise.

### Driving after drinking

Government advice regarding drink-driving has, for many years, suggested that alcohol should be avoided prior to driving (DfT, 2004b). However, nearly half of all drivers (44%) in the Omnibus Survey admitted to driving after drinking some amount of alcohol at some stage in the previous year. It is difficult to gauge the level of alcohol required to be over the legal limit. Factors such as age, sex and body weight can all have an impact on this. All drivers were asked for their own perceptions of whether they had driven whilst ‘over the limit’ in the previous year. Amongst all drivers, 12% admitted to driving when they thought they were ‘over the limit’ in the previous year. This figure is also close to the C&JS finding that 14% of drivers thought they had driven whilst ‘over the limit’ in the previous year.

#### Box 1:

##### BAC limit

The legal limit, set out in the Road Safety Act 1967, is 80mg of alcohol per 100ml blood. This is the prescribed blood alcohol concentration or BAC (IAS, 2004).

### Frequency of drink driving

The majority of drivers (72%) who admitted to driving whilst ‘over the limit’ did so only once or twice in the previous year. However, nearly one in five (18%) admitted driving whilst ‘over the limit’ regularly, that is once a month or more (the remaining 9% did so every few months). Those who had driven after drinking alcohol, but thought they were ‘under the limit’, did so more often, with 31% driving under the limit once a month or more (Omnibus Survey).

Therefore, 3% of all drivers (n=1,073) admitted to driving whilst ‘over the limit’ on three or more occasions in a year (the C&JS finding was 2% of all drivers).

### Being a passenger of an over the limit driver

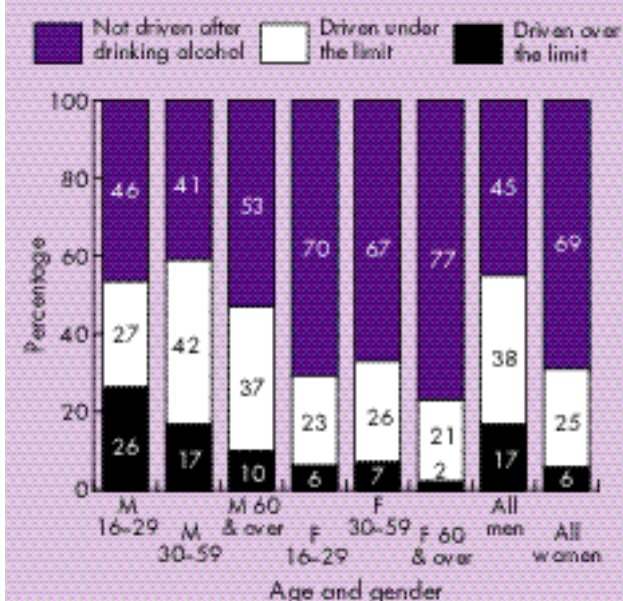
Amongst all of those questioned (drivers and non-drivers) in the Omnibus Survey, 13% said they had been a passenger of a driver who they believed to be over the legal limit on at least one occasion in the preceding year. Most (79%) of these passengers did so infrequently (once or twice in the last 12 months). Drinkers were more likely to have been passengers of someone they believed to be ‘over the limit’ (15%) in the past 12 months compared with non-drinkers (2%). Drivers who had *not* driven whilst ‘over the limit’ were less likely to have been a passenger of a driver they thought was over the limit, only 9% reported having done so in the previous year.

### Who are the drink drivers?

Men were nearly three times more likely to admit to driving whilst ‘over the limit’ (17%) than women (6%). The C&JS also confirmed that men were more likely than women to drive whilst ‘over the limit’ (17% vs. 10%). In particular, Figure 1 shows that men aged 16 to 29 were the most likely to drive while ‘over the limit’ with over a quarter (26%) admitting to doing so. As men got older, the likelihood of driving ‘over the limit’ decreased. However, men aged 30 to 59 were most likely to have driven after drinking an amount they believed to be under the legal BAC limit (Figure 1).

Previous research (Anderson et al., 2001; Rose, 2000; Riley, 1984) also identified age and gender as the most important risk factors. Drink-driving was also more common amongst unemployed young men and older businessmen (Rose, 2000).

**Figure 1 Prevalence of drink driving amongst men and women**



Notes: 1. Base numbers for males and females aged 16 to 29 and females over 60 are below 100 and therefore should be interpreted with caution.

2. Drivers aged 16 and over are included in the analysis as 16-year-olds are allowed to hold provisional licences for mopeds (Driving Standards Agency, 2004). There are four 16-year-olds included in the drivers' sample, of which none had driven after drinking alcohol.

### Drinking patterns and behaviour

The Omnibus Survey results showed that those who drank alcohol more often were more likely to have driven after drinking alcohol (either under or over the limit). Johnson et al. (1998) found that *frequency of drinking* was a more important factor than the *level of drinking*.

Amongst all respondents (drivers and non-drivers) nearly two-thirds (61%) could be classed as regular drinkers, i.e. they drank alcohol at least once a week or more, compared with 92% of 'over the limit' drivers who were more likely to drink regularly. Over half (53%) of the 'over the limit' drivers drank alcohol three or more days a week compared with around one-third (32%) of all respondents. The C&JS found that those who had driven whilst over the limit (once or twice a year) were more likely to drink alcohol daily, particularly persistent 'over the limit' drivers. For those who drank alcohol daily the findings were:

- drivers who had driven whilst 'over the limit' three or more times a year – 58%
- drivers who had driven whilst 'over the limit' once or twice a year – 38%
- drivers who had not driven whilst 'over the limit' – 17%.

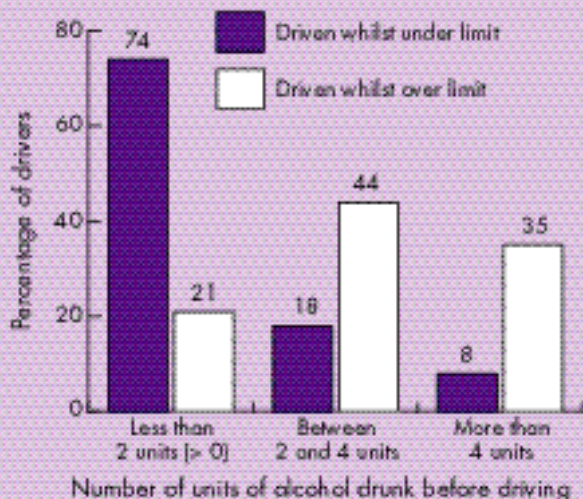
### Drink driving levels

There are no current guidelines on how many alcohol units a driver can consume before becoming 'over the limit' and amounts can vary (DfT, 2004b). It is generally assumed that the more alcohol consumed, the greater the likelihood of a road accident being caused. The most common amount thought to be sufficient to be over the limit amongst all respondents was two units (34%). This is consistent with previous research (Anderson and Ingram, 2001). However, there was a difference between men and women – most women (86%) believed the limit was two units or less compared to 60% of men.

Drivers were asked how many units they had consumed on the last occasion they drank alcohol before driving in the past year. Under- or over-reporting of this figure is possible as it is difficult for individuals to measure units. Among drivers who had driven after consuming alcohol, but believed they were under the limit, the average was two units. Amongst those who classified themselves as having driven whilst 'over the limit' the average was four units. Nearly all (95%) 'over the limit' drivers thought they were only slightly 'over the limit' despite over one-third (35%) admitted to drinking more than four units the last time they drove after drinking (Figure 2). This number could be affected by men drinking more than women but analysis was not possible due to the sample size.

Drivers were asked what was the largest amount of alcohol they had drunk before driving during the past year. Just over one-third (34%) of those who had drunk 'over the limit' admitted to driving after drinking more than five units of alcohol. The average amount drunk amongst 'over the limit' drivers was five units.

**Figure 2 Units of alcohol drunk on the last occasion before driving amongst those who believed they had driven whilst under and over the limit in the previous year**



Note: This figure is an estimation by respondents and likely to be subject to error.

**Table 1 Explanation given for driving after drinking alcohol on the last occasion**

	Driven after drinking under the limit	Driven after drinking over the limit
	%	%
Thought I was under the legal drink drive limit	63	27
I felt safe to drive	25	49
No other means of transport available	7	12
Alternative transport was too inconvenient	1	4
Alternative transport was too expensive	1	–
I did not think I would get caught	1	1
Total number	340	118

### Why drink and drive?

The analysis shows that a considerable proportion of people drive after drinking alcohol despite the risks associated with drink-driving. Drivers were asked why they chose to drive on the last occasion they drove after drinking alcohol. Table 1 shows that, amongst drivers who believed they were 'over the limit', around half (49%) said they drove because they 'felt safe to drive', despite admitting that they thought they were over the BAC limit. Over one-quarter 'thought they were under the limit' (27%) which suggests that they only realised later that they may have been 'over the limit'. Only a minority of drivers who had driven after drinking 'over the limit' reported that they had done so on that occasion as a result of lack of alternative transport (12%) or because they were unlikely to be caught (1%).

The most common reason given amongst those who had driven whilst under the limit was that they thought they were 'under the limit' (63%) and therefore decided to drive. However, this can be a very difficult 'level' to predict.

This suggests that many people who drive whilst over the limit do so not because driving is the only option but because they believe they are fit to drive. This is in agreement with previous research (Corbett and Simon, 1991).

### Attitudes

All respondents were asked about their attitudes towards drink-driving and related issues including random breath testing, lowering the legal limit and adequate punishments.

#### Drink-driving as risk factor in accidents

Drink-driving was regarded as the most common factor in road accidents. When prompted, 63% of all respondents, including over half of all drivers who had driven whilst 'over the limit' (53%), believed drink-driving was very often or always a factor in accidents. Speeding (47%) and taking drugs (47%) were cited as the second most common factors amongst all respondents.

#### Random breath testing and BAC limits

There was support for random breath testing, with 86% of all respondents in favour of introducing this policy – including 70% of drivers who had driven whilst 'over the limit'.

The majority of respondents (62%) were in favour of a lower BAC limit – this included nearly half (45%) of the 'over the limit' drivers.

#### Penalties

Attitudes towards penalties varied. Generally, respondents from the Omnibus Survey said they wanted harsher penalties for drink-drivers. However, they tended to choose more lenient options when given specific scenarios.

- Nearly three-quarters of all respondents (74%) were in favour of harsher penalties for first time offenders, although drivers who had driven over the limit (53%) were slightly less in favour of this.
- Nearly all the respondents (97%) were either in favour or strongly in favour of harsher penalties for persistent drink-drivers. This was true even amongst 'over the limit' drivers (99%).

However, when respondents were separated into two groups and presented with four different drink-driving scenarios they tended to choose either the penalties currently given or a more lenient penalty option, particularly for first time offenders. This is despite the near certainty of a mandatory disqualification in all cases where a person is over the BAC limit. Respondents were only allowed to select one option (see Table 2).

- The most common penalty chosen for first-time drivers who were 'a little over the limit' was a formal caution from the police (25%) or disqualification (19%).
- Penalties became more severe for drivers caught for a third time (still just 'a little over the limit'), with disqualification being the most popular (40%).
- Drivers two times over the BAC limit were also given harsher punishments. Disqualification from driving was the most popular punishment (39%) for first-time

**Table 2 Respondents' views of appropriate punishments for four case scenarios of drink driving**

	Scenario 1 First time caught 'a little over the limit' %	Scenario 2 Third time caught 'a little over the limit' %	Scenario 3 First time caught two times over the limit %	Scenario 4 Third time caught two times over the limit %
An informal warning from the police	12	1	4	0
A formal caution from the police	25	3	10	1
An official warning from the court (conditional discharge)	11	9	9	3
An order to pay compensation	2	1	1	1
A suspended prison sentence	1	6	4	7
A community penalty supervised by a probation officer	1	4	3	2
A fine	15	9	13	3
A prison sentence	1	17	5	38
Disqualification from driving	19	40	39	40
Penalty points on licence	11	7	11	2
Other	1	2	1	2
N	793	792	842	840

Notes: Base n is unweighted data. For the purpose of this exercise, participants were divided into two groups; the first group provided responses for Scenarios 1 and 2, while the second group responded to Scenarios 3 and 4. Therefore due to the small numbers it was not possible to do an analysis based on the drink driving typology.

offenders who were two times over the limit – very few opted for a prison sentence (5%).

- For more persistent offenders two times over the limit, prison (38%) or disqualification (40%) were deemed to be the most appropriate punishments.

When asked about the likelihood of detection by the police whilst over the limit, drivers felt confident they would not be caught. All respondents were asked how likely it was for a drink driver to be caught if driving over the legal limit once a week for a year:

- thought it was unlikely or very unlikely they would be caught – 50%
- thought it was likely or very likely – 43%
- don't know – 7%.

Those who had driven 'over the limit' held a similar view with just over half (55%) believing it was unlikely that a person would be caught despite drink driving once a week.

## Conclusion

These findings show that around one in eight drivers (12%) believed they had driven whilst 'over the limit' – 3% admitted doing so more than three times in the previous year. One in eight respondents (13%) also admitted to being a passenger of a drink-driver. The people who were most likely to drive whilst 'over the limit', were men, particularly those aged 16 to 29 and people who were frequent drinkers. When explaining their behaviour, 'over the limit' drivers often maintained that they 'felt safe to drive' despite some admitting to drinking more than five units of alcohol before driving.

In general, respondents took a very negative view of drink-driving, viewing it as a frequent cause of accidents and a behaviour that needed harsher penalties (this varied little even amongst those who had driven whilst 'over the limit'). However, when faced with a series of scenarios for driving over the BAC limit – all of which would result in a mandatory

disqualification – people's attitudes towards punishment showed greater leniency, with harsher penalties such as prison reserved for persistent drink-drivers. This may suggest a need for greater clarity regarding penalties for drink-driving offences.

Recent measures have helped to reduce drink-driving casualties and encourage a change in attitudes towards drink-driving (DfT, 2004b). However, the behaviour and attitudes of those who continue to drive whilst over the limit still needs to be tackled. This also applies to those who

effectively condone drink-driving by agreeing to be a passenger of someone they believe to be 'over the limit'.

The findings also show that while people recognise the risks of drink driving, many drivers still overestimate their ability to drive, believing they are personally safe to drive. The belief that the likelihood of detection is low is also a concern, although it is difficult to say whether this is an accurate assumption. It is possible that if drivers believed that they may be detected for drink-driving it could dissuade them from taking unnecessary risks.

### Methodological note

The analysis is based on the results of data from England and Wales, collected by the ONS Omnibus Survey in 2002, on behalf of the Home Office. 1,648 people were interviewed – 1,083 had driven in the previous year. Most of the results reported are from the 1,073 drivers aged 16 and over who completed the drink-driving self-completion module in full. As the type of vehicle was not specified, those aged 16 and over were included as they are of a legal age to drive a moped (Driving Standards Agency, 2004) therefore may have had a provisional moped licence. Findings are based on behaviour in the last 12 months unless otherwise stated. Of the 1,073 drivers, nearly all those who had driven in the last 12 months had also drunk alcohol during this period (93%). All respondents (including non-drivers) were asked about being a passenger of a drink-driver, their views on drink-driving and relevant penalties as well as completing the Department of Health drinking module.

The 2003 Crime and Justice Survey (C&JS) is a self-report offending survey which asks the general household population about drink-driving as well as other offences. The figures from the C&JS relate to people who have driven in the past year and are over 16 years (n=5,746).

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