Scottish Government Health Directorates Chief Scientist Office

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# UNDER THE LIMIT: UNDERSTANDING THE DIRECT AND INDIRECT IMPACT OF LOWERING SCOTLAND'S DRINK-DRIVE LIMIT

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## Aim
Scotland's drink-drive limit was reduced (from 80 to 50mg/100ml of blood) in December 2014. This qualitative study aimed to explore how the lower limit affected drinking and driving behaviour.

## Project Outline/Methodology
We carried out 12 group interviews with the general public, 14 interviews with owners/managers of pubs/bars/clubs ("licensees"), and interviews with 19 people from the police/Road Safety Scotland. We recruited a variety of groups in terms of gender, age, wealth, urban/rural and job roles. We also analysed information on levels of roadside breath testing for alcohol, and money spent on media campaigns.

## Key Results
(1) Knowledge, Understanding and Support:

Most people knew about the change, but many were confused about what the lower limit meant. People were unsure of how much alcohol would put them over the limit, and how long it would take to be under the limit after a drinking session. The public wanted more information on these issues and debated the merits of a zero limit. All police officers, and most of the public and licensees who were interviewed accepted the limit change.

(2) Implementation: Road Safety Scotland ran media campaigns which were designed to ensure that *'nobody, unless they had been on the moon, didn't know that the limit was changing'.* The main message of the campaigns was *'the best approach is none',* meaning that no alcohol should be drunk before driving. Some participants reported that this message was deliberately ambiguous, because it implied that the limit was zero. Police participants reported that enforcement was largely the same before and after the limit change, however analysis of breath testing figures suggest that testing rates fell from late 2013 onwards. Similarly, spending on media campaigns relating to drink-driving peaked in 2014 and fell away sharply in the following years.

(3) Impact: The public, licensee and police participants agreed that some people who previously had one or two drinks before driving chose to drink less after the limit change. Others reported changes related to transport and planning around drinking including the next day. Most licensees reported no overall effect on their profits, with a few reporting persisting negative effects of varying size. Most participants felt that *'hardcore'* drink-drivers, who drove when above the old limit, were unlikely to have changed their behaviour. As a result, police were divided on whether the limit change had affected drink-driving-related road accident levels. Breath testing figures suggest that the number of people being caught over the limit has been increasing since prior to the limit change. Most of those who are caught have alcohol levels in their blood that are above the old limit.

## Conclusions
The reduction in the drink-drive limit was reported to have contributed to reduced drinking before driving amongst some groups, but was not thought to affect people who routinely engaged in drink-driving. Any impact was partly due to uncertainty about how much alcohol would put someone over the limit and how long alcohol stayed in the body; the public would like greater clarity on these issues.

## What does this study add to the field?
This study suggests that reducing the drink-drive limit may affect alcohol consumption even amongst people who weren't previously drink-driving.

## Implications for Practice or Policy
Improved public information on drink-driving would help to resolve public confusion; greater media campaigning and enforcement may reduce offending.

## Where to next?
Another research project is considering whether the limit change affected road traffic accidents. Better data are required to explore how police enforcement affects offending rates.

## Further details from:
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