Administrative Driver's Licence Suspensions in Ontario: Tracking effects on public knowledge and behaviour

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As part of its Road Safety Plan, the Government of Ontario introduced Administrative Driver's Licence Suspensions (ADLS) effective November 29, 1996. Under the provisions of ADLS, any driver charged with either refusing to provide a breath sample or driving with a Blood Alcohol Level (BAL) over 80 mg% will have his or her drivers licence removed immediately by the police, for a period of 90 days, under the authority of the Registrar of Motor Vehicles.

ADLS originated in the United States. In American courts, it was often the case that offenders were able to avoid post-conviction licence suspensions through negotiation and plea bargaining. Administrative licence suspensions arose as an effort to apply licence suspensions more consistently by making them a consequence of failing the breath test (Voas and Lacey, 1990). Thus these administrative suspensions are administered by the licensing authority (in Ontario, the Ministry of Transportation) rather than the judiciary. At present, about 40 American states have introduced ADLS and it has also been introduced in Manitoba and Nova Scotia. Other Canadian provinces are also considering this measure.

Licence suspensions have important specific deterrent effects, in that they reduce offenders' driving and collisions during the period that they are in effect (Mann, Vingilis, Gavin, Adlaf and Anglin, 1991; Homel, 1988). However, the major impact hoped for with such a measure is a general deterrent effect, where people who might otherwise drink and drive are deterred from doing so by knowledge of the law (Homel, 1990; Vingilis, 1990). Previous studies have demonstrated that introduction of new drinking-driving laws or policies can have a general deterrent effect if they are introduced under the correct conditions. The classic example is the British Road Safety act in 1969, which introduced per se laws to that country. Ross's (1973) analysis of the impact of the act revealed a significant and marked decline in accidents most influenced by alcohol (single vehicle nighttime accidents). However, the accident rate appeared to return to pre-law levels after about a year.

Various authors have suggested that this initial impact is due to an increase in perceived risk of being caught that is caused by the high level of publicity associated with new legal sanctions,
while the decline is due to the realization that the actual risks of apprehension are not as high as initially believed (e.g., Homel, 1990; Ross, 1973; Vingilis, 1990). Similar patterns of impact of new legal measures have been observed in other jurisdictions (e.g., Homel, 1990), including the effect of the law introduced in Ontario in 1983 (Vingilis, Blefgen, Lei, Sykora and Mann, 1988) which made it an offence, punishable by an immediate withdrawal of the drivers licence for a period of 12 hours, to drive with a Blood Alcohol Level greater than 50 mg%.

Few previous evaluations have examined awareness of administrative suspension laws before and after they are introduced. As noted, this awareness is considered a key link in the effectiveness of a law, and the plan for implementation of ADLS included a major public information campaign. Similarly, few previous evaluations have examined the effects of administrative suspensions on self-reported drinking-driving behaviour. We hypothesized that public awareness of the law would be high when it was introduced, and that the introduction of the law will reduce drinking-driving behaviour, as assessed through pre- and post-law measures obtained from a general population survey of Ontario adults.

METHOD

To evaluate the impact of ADLS on public awareness and drinking-driving behaviour, data on knowledge of the Administrative Suspension law and on self-reported drinking and driving were obtained from the Addiction Research Foundation’s Ontario Drug Monitor. This survey, initiated in March of 1996, is based on a monthly two-stage (household and respondent) random-digit-dialing design administered by Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing technology. In 1996, approximately 300 respondents aged 18 and above were interviewed per month, a number reduced to 200 per month in 1997. Monthly participation rates ranged from 62% to 65%.

The survey contains questions on self-reported drinking and driving (in the past 12 months and in the past 30 days), and knowledge of the administrative suspension. The self-reported drinking-driving questions have been administered since the survey’s inception. Knowledge of the new sanction was assessed with the following question: «Now I want to ask you what you think would happen to a driver in Ontario who was charged at the police station for driving a motor vehicle with over the legal blood alcohol level of 80 milligrams. (The correct answer is in brackets after each alternative.) First, nothing would happen at the time the charge was laid. (Incorrect.) The driver’s licence would be suspended for 12 hours. (Correct.) The driver would be fined $100. (Incorrect.) The driver’s licence would be suspended for 90 days. (Administrative suspension, correct after November 1996.) The driver would spend 48 hours in jail. (Incorrect).» This knowledge question was in a block of questions which, because of space restrictions, was administered between April and July ’96 and reintroduced in December, ’96.
The survey data reported here are weighted to account for unequal sampling fractions, and thus the percentages reflect a representative sample of Ontario adults (18 and over).

RESULTS

First, we examine knowledge of the 90-day suspension before and after the introduction of ADLS in Ontario. At the time of preparation of this report, data to January, ’97 were available. The results of the knowledge question are presented in Table 1 for the entire sample. The table presents the percentage of respondents who indicate, for each sanction, that the sanction will be applied at the time a drinking-driving charge is laid by the police. It seems clear that knowledge of the administrative suspension (90 days) increased dramatically with the introduction of the law. The proportion of the samples endorsing this alternative nearly doubled between the pre-introduction and post-introduction samples.

Several other observations are of interest here. First, the false positive rate was fairly high. This may be understandable for the 90-day suspension alternative in the pre-law period. The measure had already received publicity, beginning in October 1995, as an impending change to the drinking driving laws with the publication of the government’s ‘Road Safety Plan’. Subsequently, it again received publicity in July, ’96 when the Bill introducing ADLS received third reading in the House. However, the high rate for the fine and jail options is somewhat surprising. It is also worth noting that a substantial proportion of respondents believed nothing would happen even after ADLS was introduced. Further examination of the characteristics of this group might identify a ‘hard to reach’ group who is worth targeting in countermeasure development.

Table 2 presents the self-reported drinking-driving behaviour of males in the sample with a driver’s licence, both in the past year and in the past 30 days. The results are collapsed in two-month blocks for presentation purposes.
Table 1: Percentage of All Respondents Identifying Which Sanctions are Applied As Soon As a Drinking Driver is Charged (Post-Law Data Italicized).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>April '96 n=303</th>
<th>May '96 n=302</th>
<th>June '96 n=303</th>
<th>July '96 n=302</th>
<th>Dec. '96 n=303</th>
<th>Jan. '97 n=208</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fined $100</td>
<td>27.2</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>28.5</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48 Hours in Jail</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>28.1</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>24.2</td>
<td>20.8</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licence Suspended 12 hours</td>
<td>70.0</td>
<td>69.6</td>
<td>69.9</td>
<td>70.2</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>52.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licence Suspended 90 Days</td>
<td><strong>40.9</strong></td>
<td><strong>43.7</strong></td>
<td><strong>46.2</strong></td>
<td><strong>44.0</strong></td>
<td><strong>73.6</strong></td>
<td><strong>78.3</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nothing</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>17.2</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>13.2</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Here, there appears to be a reduction in the self-reported drinking-driving measures between October/November, immediately prior to the introduction of ADLS, and December/January, immediately following its introduction. However, it appears that the proportion of the sample who reported driving after drinking, either in the previous year or in the past 30 days, had in at least some previous months reached levels as low as those reached in December/January.

Table 2: Percentage of Male Respondents with a Driver’s Licence Who Reported Driving Within an Hour of Two or More Drinks (Post-Law Data Italicized) Between April, '96 and Jan., '97.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>April/May n=206</th>
<th>June/July n=231</th>
<th>Aug./Sept. n=221</th>
<th>Oct./Nov. n=230</th>
<th>Dec./Jan. n=192</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In the past year</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>27.6</td>
<td>29.1</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the past 30 days</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSION

Previous research suggests two processes must occur for a new drinking countermeasure to reduce aggregate levels of collisions, injuries and fatalities. First, the public must be aware of the new countermeasure, and second, drinking drivers must alter their behaviour in response to the countermeasure. With the introduction of ADLS in Ontario, it appears that the first is being fulfilled. Public awareness of the sanction nearly doubled when the measure was introduced in December. It is particularly noteworthy that this has occurred at a time when, due to fiscal restraints, no paid public information campaign was possible. Instead, information about the law was spread through a series of press releases and media events. Anecdotal evidence suggests that excellent coverage was achieved, with the major electronic and print media all carrying stories about the introduction of ADLS throughout the month of December. Although the amount of media attention to the countermeasure seems to have dropped off in January, public awareness remained high in that month.

The impact on self-reported drinking-driving behaviour is consistent with a beneficial effect of the law, but is not as clear as the impact on knowledge. Specifically, in June/July rates of self-reported drinking-driving within the past 30 days were as low as those seen after introduction of the law in December/January. There may be several possible explanations for this observation. The fluctuations observed may not be due to the impact of the law, but instead are simply random variation. Alternatively, these different levels could be due to naturally-occurring seasonal variation in drinking-driving rates. However, the lower rates of drinking-driving observed in June/July may also have been related to the media attention given to the passage of the Bill in early July enabling the introduction of ADLS. As a result, some drivers may have reduced driving after drinking at that time.

Although these observations are preliminary, they provide an important picture of the early impact of ADLS in Ontario. They underscore the potential value in monitoring the public’s knowledge and behaviour as impacted by the law, and also point to the value of rolling survey data for this purpose. So far, the indicators suggest a successful introduction of this measure. However, continued collection of these data must be carried out, to monitor such factors as seasonal effects, and the effect on collisions, injuries and fatalities needs to be documented. This will be done in the ongoing evaluation of this initiative.
REFERENCES


