Young drivers Under the influence of alcohol and their passengers - the role of informal social control

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The Risk Group of Young Drivers in the former East Germany

While raising the legal limit from 0% to 0.08% in the former East Germany in 1993 produced only minor overall changes (Krüger, 1995, Krüger & Vollrath, 1997), young drivers between 18 and 24 years of age were a dangerous exception. This was one important result of the German Roadside Survey 1992-1994 (for an overview, see Krüger, 1997). This roadside survey was done in a part of former East Germany (Thuringen) in 1992 when the legal BAC limit of 0% was still officially valid and again in Spring of 1993 and 1994. To control for seasonal effects, a comparable roadside survey was conducted in a part of former West Germany (Unterfranken) at the same timepoints. In Thuringen, an overall of 11,099 drivers were stopped and breath alcohol tested while in Unterfranken 9,087 drivers were stopped. Of those, 3,228 (Thuringen) and 2,720 were young drivers between 18 and 24 years of age. Figure 1 gives the change in the percentage of trips under the influence of alcohol (DUI) in both regions of Germany at the three timepoints.

Figure 1: Percentage of the young drivers' trips with low, moderate and large BACs before the change of the legal limit (92) and in the two following years (93 and 94) in East and West Germany.

[Diagram showing percentage of young drivers' trips with low, moderate, and large BACs in East and West Germany over the years 1992 to 1994]
In the young drivers in East Germany two effects are visible: (1) In all BAC classes substantially more young people drive in East Germany than in the West, and (2) raising the BAC limit led to an increase in DUI driving (0.03 - 0.079%) and even to an increase of intoxicated driving above the new legal limit of 0.08%. This development is not found in the older drivers. In contrary, East German drivers older than 25 years drive more seldom under the influence of alcohol and display a similar timecourse as the West German drivers.

What did happen in the East? Why do young drivers drive more often under the influence of alcohol and why do they react more strongly upon raising the BAC limit?

Examining Young Passengers

Drugs are usually consumed in a social context. This is especially true for young people in the case of alcohol consumption. It follows that positive as well as negative solutions of the drink-driving conflict are found within groups of young people when they drive together. Thus, a first answer to the questions posed is given by an extension of the German Roadside Survey which was done in Spring of 1994. In every car stopped between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m., the BAC of the passengers was recorded in addition to that of the driver. This extension yielded data from 1189 passengers from the East and 867 passengers from the West. From those informations, three groups of trips were distinguished:

(1)Trips where both the driver and all passengers are under the influence of alcohol ("all drunk")
(2)Trips where the driver is under the influence of alcohol and is driving alone ("driving drunk alone")
(3)Trips where the driver is under the influence of alcohol but at least one passenger is sober and is not allowed to drive ("driving with sober passenger").

Those three classes where distinguished for three BAC classes:
(1)0.001 to 0.029% (in Germany, driving with those BACs has no legal consequences whatever),
(2)0.03 to 0.079% (legal consequences are possible when driver appears influenced), and
(3)0.08% and above (above the legal BAC limit).

Figure 2 gives the respective percentages of trips in the three BAC classes for young drivers in the former East and West Germany. For the presentation the number of all DUI trips in the respective BAC class was set to 100%. Thus, the percentages of the three types of groups add up to 100%.
Figure 2: For drivers of each BAC class the percentage of trips taken alone (left), with drunk passengers (middle) and with at least one sober passenger, who could have driven (right) is given for young drivers (18-24 years) in East and West Germany.

Figure 2 shows that young West German drivers are always alone when their BAC exceeds 0.08% and that most of the trips in the lower BAC classes are done alone, too (44% for BACs below 0.03%, 58% for DUI trips below 0.08%). Sober passengers are never present if the BAC exceeds 0.08% and only in 17%, if the BAC lies below 0.08%. In contrast, in East Germany 75% of all trips with BACs above the legal limit are done with passengers, even 50% with at least one sober passenger who could have driven the car sober (and probably more safely). For the lower BAC classes, the percentages resemble that of the West Germans.

The high proportion of intoxicated drivers driving alone in West Germany may be due to the fact that sober persons refuse to accompany the intoxicated driver or were not asked by the driver to do so. This social pressure does also lead to a substantially lower rate of DUI trips (in comparison to those of East German young drivers, see Figure 1) as safe solutions of the drink-driving conflict are found (e.g., one person in a group stays sober and drives home). The young drivers in the former East Germany seem to experience far less social pressure in this context: Especially with very large BACs above the legal limit, trips with passengers are rather the rule than the exception. As passengers, who are probably members of the driver’s peer-group, do not seem to mind intoxicated driving, less pressure is exerted against it, yielding a larger percentage of DUI trips in the former East Germany.
Consequences for Prevention

The results of the passenger analysis indicate that informal social control is an important factor increasing traffic safety especially in the case of young drivers who are to decide whether to drive under the influence of alcohol or to find a better solution. The potential of this factor has not yet been (fully) realized in preventive measures. This would require including passengers as a target group: On the one hand, they should realize the enormous influence they can exert on the drivers. On the other hand, they have to understand their own responsibility for either preventing a DUI trip or encouraging the drunk driver.

To achieve this aim, passengers could be made legally responsible if driving with an intoxicated driver and/or for any consequences these trips may have, e.g., an accident. The resulting increase in attention which is given to the passengers would have to be supported by public advertisements and/or campaigns which reinforce responsible behavior of the passengers and show strategies for hindering friend from drunk driving effectively. Including this large group of subjects in new preventive measures one may expect a substantial impact on the frequency of DUI drivers, especially for young drivers.

References


