Rehabilitation of drunk drivers and the SMADIT project: Collaboration between the Police Force, the Road Administration and the Social Services

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Abstract

The aim of the SMADIT project is to reduce the number of drunk drivers on the Swedish roads and reduce the number of repeated drunk driving offences. The project is a three way collaboration between the Swedish Police Force, the Swedish Road Administration and the Swedish Social Services. According to the guidelines the police should inform the suspected drunk drivers about SMADIT and ask if they want to be contacted by the Social Services. If they agree then a member of staff from the Social Services will contact them within 24 hours.

The purpose of this paper is to present the results from a qualitative study evaluating the effects of the SMADIT. Thirteen male drivers and one female driver who agreed to take part in the SMADIT project were interviewed. The questions covered their experience of SMADIT but also the circumstances behind their drinking and driving.

The results showed that the initial contact with the police determined if they would agree to participate in the project or not. An important aim with SMADIT project is the early contact with the Social Service but the results from this study showed that several of the informants needed time for reflection and to recover from the shock after being stopped by the police on suspicion of drunk driving. However, according to informants it was important that not too many days passed before a contact was established. During the meeting with the Social Service the informants were offered different kinds of treatment. All of the informants were very pleased with this contact.

According to the guidelines provided by the SMADIT project a consensus has to be reached otherwise the Social Services cannot contact the person. In this study we found that a person straight after the event does not always think clearly and we therefore propose that the SMADIT project is extended to also include those who initially reject the offer.

Introduction

Driving while under the influence of alcohol or drugs is a problem of great concern in Sweden as it is in many other countries. The legal limit for alcohol in Swedish drivers is a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.2 g/L whereas there is zero tolerance for drugs (except for medicinal drugs by doctor’s prescription). An observational study in three
counties in Sweden found that approximately 0.24% of the traffic volume comprised vehicles driven by people with blood alcohol over the legal limit (Forsman et al., 2007).

SMADIT is the name of a project aimed to reduce the number of drunk drivers on Swedish roads and is a collaboration between the Swedish Police Force, the Swedish Road Administration and the Social Services. The goal is that every suspected drunk or drug driver shall, as soon as apprehended by the police, be offered contact with the Social Services and, if needed, suitable treatment.

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the drunken driver’s perception of the SMADIT project.

**Method**

In order to evaluate the effect of the SMADIT project a qualitative approach with interviews was selected. The strength of a qualitative study is that it is flexible and can be adapted to the situation, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of a specific issue or phenomenon.

The suspected drunk drivers own stories and perspectives form the so-called dense descriptions (thick description), a contextual knowledge and understanding that can be used in conjunction with improvements of the SMADIT project. The qualitative research approach thus provides no statistical result. Instead of answering questions about how many and how much, the qualitative study includes questions about how and why (Holme & Solvang, 1997).

Prior to the interviews a short survey was sent to all 21 police authorities in Sweden. The purpose of this study was to establish how many drivers had been informed about SMADIT and how many had accepted the offer to be contacted by the Social Services.

**Participants**

In the present study, 14 suspected drunk drivers (1 female and 13 male) were interviewed about their perceptions and experience of the SMADIT method. The participants were between 35 and 60 years old, all of them employed living with a partner.

**Procedure**

Selection and recruitment of people to interview was done in cooperation with the different Police Authorities. The police officer handed over the information about the interview study to the suspected drunk driver. In addition to this drivers were also recruited via the Social Services who had contacted them after losing their license as a consequence of drinking and driving. After receiving the information it was up to the drivers themselves to contact the researcher and decide when and where to meet. The interviews usually took place at a library nearby or in their own home. The interviews were conducted with the help of an interview
guide. The guide consisted of a number of open-ended questions, which in turn had several follow-up questions to give more space to the interviewee's own story and any spontaneous statements. Some issues covered related to procedures within SMADIT while others focused more on responses from the Police Force and Social Services. All the interviews were tape-recorded and then transcribed. Each interview took approximately 60 minutes.

Results

The results from the short survey with all the various Police Forces showed that 45 per cent of the suspected drivers were informed about SMADIT and among them about 27 per cent accepted the offer. These numbers are in line with earlier studies (Gustafsson & Henriksson, 2007; Hrelja with several, 2009).

The interviewed suspected drunk drivers stated that the drunken driving incident and the treatment was a turning point in their life. As a consequence of this most of the informants had stopped abusing alcohol. Also, the informants' family relationships and life situations have improved. The majority of the informants did not think they would drink and drive in the future.

Overall, informants argued that the SMADIT project was a good method to prevent drunk driving. Informants' narratives show that the way the police informed about SMADIT was very important. Most of the informants felt that being stopped by the police was very embarrassing. Therefore, police kindness and understanding was very important and seemed to contribute to the informants' acceptance to take part in the project. There were also other reasons which might have influenced their decision: Firstly, they were more likely to accept if they had a history of drinking and driving. The second reason was related to their emotional state after being stopped by the police. This meant that they were not fully aware of themselves signing the form which allowed the Social Services to contact them. Thirdly, some accepted the offer because they hoped that this would help them to retain their driving license since they were being co-operative. However, regardless of the reason the contact with the Social Services and subsequent treatment had helped them to overcome their problems with alcohol.

Conclusion

The aim of the SMADIT project is to reduce the number of drunk drivers on our roads. The results from this study showed that the contact with the police was crucial. Therefore it is important that the police inform about SMADIT and that they provide the suspected drunk driver with sufficient and accurate verbal information about the project.

Furthermore, the interviews showed that it was not necessary that the first contact with the Social Services took place within twenty-four hours as stipulated in the guidelines. Several of the informants indicated that they needed some time for reflection and to recover from the shock after being stopped by the police on suspicion of drunk driving. However, according to
the informants, it was important that not too many days passed before a first contact and meeting is held.

The initial survey sent to the different Police Authorities showed that about half of the suspected drunk drivers who received information about SMADIT agreed to take part in the project. The reason for rejecting the offer might be that they are not in need of any treatment but it could also be that they do not want to admit to themselves that they have a problem. It could therefore be argued that people who do not want to take part in the project and be contacted by the Social Services should get a second chance. The police could ask them again when they are contacted some days later and when the key to the car should be handed back.

Finally, the police motivation to work with SMADIT can increase if the Social Services ask the suspected drunk driver for permission to give feedback to the police about the person's contact with them.

References


