

SEAT BELT USE AND ALCOHOL-IMPAIRED DRIVING: BEHAVIOR AND ATTITUDES IN AUSTRALIA, CANADA, THE UNITED KINGDOM, AND THE UNITED STATES

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INTRODUCTION

The highway safety problem has similar dimensions in all motorized societies. Two factors that have contributed strongly to motor injuries worldwide are alcohol-impaired driving and failure to use seat belts. While all countries have made substantial efforts to decrease alcohol-impaired driving and increase belt use rates, they have taken somewhat different paths in addressing these common problems, and some have done better than others. Countries such as Australia have achieved remarkable gains in both areas, while other countries have lagged. The United States is a laggard particularly in the belt use area. It may be possible for less successful countries to learn from others how to make greater progress toward their goals. To investigate this possibility, a telephone survey of drivers in four countries was undertaken. This survey obtained information on drivers' self-reported behavior regarding seat belt use and drinking and driving as well as their attitudes and perceptions about these behaviors and the laws governing them.

There are two separate existing publications that present and discuss the survey results [1,2]. This paper summarizes and comments further on information in the prior reports.

METHODS

Computer-aided telephone interviews were conducted November 15-27, 1998, in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States with respondents who said they were age 18 or older and had a driver's license. Survey results have a margin of error of ± 3.9 percentage points for samples in Australia and the United States, and ± 4.3 percentage points for samples in Canada and the United Kingdom.

A total of 2,251 respondents completed the survey—626 in Australia, 516 in Canada, 503 in the United Kingdom, and 606 in the United States. A random-digit-dial sample was used in each country with quotas established to ensure accurate regional and gender representation. For more information on the sample stratification and distribution, see Cammisa et al. [1], which discusses self-reported belt use and attitudes toward belt use laws and their enforcement among these respondents.

SEAT BELT USE

All four countries have experienced substantial increases in seat belt use, primarily through mandatory belt use laws. However, observed use rates still vary considerably. For example, observed use rates exceed 90 percent in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom, but are less than 70 percent in the United States. There are likely to be cultural factors that influence belt use rates. However, because all four countries have belt use laws, there may be differences in the laws and their application that help to explain the success of some countries in achieving high belt use and the lesser success in the United States. Accordingly, the survey focused on attitudes about the laws and the rationale for using or not using seat belts. The major results of the survey are presented in Table 1.

More than 9 out of 10 respondents in each of the four countries said they thought seat belts were effective in preventing injuries. However, fewer respondents reported that they always used belts when driving or as passengers. Reported use was highest in Australia, where 85 percent reported always using belts as drivers, 90 percent as front-seat passengers, and 78 percent as rear-seat passengers. Respondents in Canada and the United Kingdom also reported high belt use as drivers and front-seat passengers, but not as rear-seat passengers, despite having laws that require use in rear seats. Belt use rates in the United States were substantially lower than in other countries for all seating positions, in line with the results of observational surveys.

There appear to be two tracks to achieving high belt use, exemplified by Australia and the United Kingdom in one case and Canada in the other. Respondents in Australia and the United Kingdom were more supportive of belt use laws than those in Canada and particularly the United States and were more likely to say they used belts because of the legal requirement and to avoid a ticket. Australian and United Kingdom respondents were also more likely to say they used belts because it was a habit. In the United States and Canada, on the other hand, respondents were more likely to give situational reasons for using belts. That is, they were more likely than

Table 1
Response to Seat Belt Questions by Country (Percent)

	Australia	Canada	United Kingdom	United States
Always use belts:				
As driver	85	80	85	67
As front-seat passenger	90	79	88	68
As rear-seat passenger	78	56	45	38
Think belts are effective	96	94	96	94
In favor of belt use laws	94	84	90	76
Reasons for belt use:				
Bad weather	57	62	51	72
Habit	84	77	82	74
Required by law	75	67	80	56
Others were using	25	32	29	33
Someone told me to	26	28	24	32
Avoid ticket	71	59	66	56
Think nonusers likely to be stopped	59	67	43	48
Been stopped and checked for belt use	17	50	14	22

respondents from Australia or the United Kingdom to say they used belts because of bad weather, or because others were using belts, or because someone told them to.

The United States is similar to Canada in many respects, although lacking the features that seem responsible for the much higher belt use in Canada. The chief difference is in enforcement presence. Canadians were much more likely than respondents in any other country to think they would be stopped by the police if they were unbelted, and 50 percent said they had in fact been stopped and checked for belt use, compared with 22 percent in the United States, 17 percent in Australia, and 14 percent in the United Kingdom.

Thus in Australia and the United Kingdom there is widespread acceptance of belt use laws, and respondents report using belts both because of the laws and because belt use has become a habit. In North America the data suggest that the United States could profit from adopting the enforcement tactics thought to have been instrumental in achieving high belt use in Canada. Unlike Australia and the United Kingdom, belt use in Canada did not initially increase to high levels after laws were enacted; the introduction of highly publicized enforcement programs is credited with increasing belt use from about 50 percent to more than 90 percent. Such programs have also been successfully employed in the United States, but their use has been infrequent.

ALCOHOL-IMPAIRED DRIVING

As in the case of seat belts, there has been a positive trend in regard to alcohol-impaired driving. In the 1980s and continuing in the 1990s, many countries experienced major reductions in crashes involving alcohol-impaired driving. For example, in the United States the percentage of fatally injured drivers with blood alcohol concentrations equal to or greater than 0.10 percent dropped from 47 percent in 1980 to 38 percent in 1990 and 28 percent in 1998. Substantial declines have also occurred in Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom.

Despite these gains the problem remains serious worldwide, and further progress in combating alcohol-impaired driving is needed. What can we learn from the past two decades about which alcohol policies work best so they can be more consistently implemented, and what can countries learn from each other in this regard?

As with belt use laws, laws against alcohol-impaired driving have played an important role in reducing the problem. Laws and penalties do differ somewhat among countries, but some of the differences that are cited as important are more illusory than real. For example, there is a fairly widespread perception in the United States that tough penalties are the key to reducing alcohol-impaired driving and that Scandinavian and other European countries such as Germany have been more successful than the United States because of their tough penalties. In reality the United States has penalties that are as tough as those in most developed countries [3].

In terms of deterrence theory, meaningful penalties are important, but the essential component is creating a public perception that the likelihood of offenders being detected and arrested is high. There are differences across countries in the amount and types of enforcement being practiced; Australia is exemplary with its extensive random breath test program.

Vigorous and sustained enforcement against alcohol-impaired driving ultimately depends on there being widespread public and political support for this practice. Accordingly, the survey questions concerning alcohol-impaired driving dealt with current amounts of enforcement activity and public tolerance for tough penalties and increased enforcement. The survey also obtained information on reported drinking, and drinking and driving, practices.

Table 2 indicates the extent to which respondents said they had been checked by police for alcohol. Australia was by far the leader, with 82 percent reported being checked, and 47 percent saying this had happened three or more times. Canadians reported being checked much more often than respondents from the United States and the United Kingdom.

Table 2
Number of Times Respondents Reported Being Checked for Alcohol by Police (Percent)

	Australia	Canada	United Kingdom	United States
Never	18	35	84	70
Once	17	17	8	11
Twice	18	18	5	9
Three or more	47	28	3	9
Don't know/refused	0	2	0	1

Table 3 provides information on attitudes toward enforcement. In each country, about 80 percent thought drinking and driving should carry the highest penalty compared with aggressive driving, red light running, and other offenses. Australians in particular and Canadians were most likely to say police were doing enough in terms of enforcement, but still there was considerable sentiment in all countries that police could be doing more. Similarly, the majority of respondents in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom and 45 percent in Australia thought current penalties were not tough enough. Very few thought the penalties were too tough.

The percentages of drinkers who said they had driven during the past year after having had too much to drink were 19 percent in Australia, 18 percent in Canada, 15 percent in the United States, and 13 percent in the United Kingdom. When these percentages were based on all respondents, results were 15 percent in Australia, 11 percent in Canada, 10 percent in the United Kingdom, and 8 percent in the United States.

Table 3
Attitudes About Alcohol Enforcement (Percent)

	Australia	Canada	United Kingdom	United States
Which should carry the greatest penalty?				
Drinking and driving	74	81	80	80
Aggressive driving	9	5	11	8
Red light running	10	6	4	6
Speeding	6	3	6	4
Other	1	5	0	2
Are police enforcing enough?				
Doing enough	65	54	43	46
Not doing enough	26	35	47	42
Doing too much	4	4	4	5
Don't know/refused	4	7	7	8
How tough are penalties?				
About right	42	36	33	38
Not tough enough	45	56	60	53
Too tough	5	3	1	4
Don't know/refused	8	5	5	5

CONCLUSIONS

The results generally indicate public tolerance for vigorous enforcement of tough laws. Australia stands out as the country that has the highest enforcement presence, with 8 of 10 respondents having been checked for alcohol at least once, and more than half having been checked multiple times. This reflects the results of a roadside breath testing program so extensive that nearly one out of three Australians would be expected to be stopped and checked each year [4]. Australia leads the way in enforcement against alcohol-impaired driving. The Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution has been interpreted as prohibiting police from doing random breath testing as it is done in Australia, although sobriety checkpoints, with specified procedures for stopping and evaluating drivers for alcohol impairment, are used in many states. However, the impressive aspect of the Australian effort is the sheer amount of enforcement that is done, and this, along with the highly publicized nature of enforcement, is considered the key factor.

Australians were more likely than those in other countries to think police were doing enough enforcement and that penalties were sufficiently tough. Even so, there was substantial support for even greater enforcement

than presently exists. It is notable that despite the high levels of enforcement in Australia, a sizable percentage of respondents admitted driving after having too much to drink in the past year.

The United States appears to lag in enforcement, but there is evidence that increased enforcement would be an acceptable means of addressing the problem of alcohol-impaired driving. What is lacking in many states is the political will to support this increased effort.

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