

Key strategic issues with rural drink drive enforcement

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Abstract

Rural drink driving is a serious road safety issue which contributes to a significant number of fatalities and injuries in New Zealand annually. Although enforcement remains a key mechanism for reducing the incidence of rural drink driving, there are a number of crucial strategic issues that influence its effectiveness, including: who should conduct the enforcement, resource availability, enforcement predictability and visibility, issues around detection vs. deterrence and long term vs. short term deterrence, the word of mouth (WOM) effect, and the avoidance of enforcement activity. Utilising international literature, interview data, and fieldwork, this paper examines some of the main strategic issues relating to rural drink drive enforcement in New Zealand, and concludes that in order for this enforcement to be effective, these issues need to be seriously considered.

Keywords

Rural drink driving, police enforcement, issues

Introduction

Every year in New Zealand, rural people are killed or injured on rural roads, with drink driving accounting for a considerable proportion of these crashes. Consequently, rural drink driving is a serious road safety issue for New Zealand Police, and other road safety practitioners.

A key mechanism for reducing the incidence of rural drink driving (and drink driving more generally) is police enforcement, and this is partly achieved through increasing the perceived risk of being detected and apprehended by police for drink driving. As such, drink drive enforcement revolves around the primary objective of changing problematic road user behaviour (drink driving), and the secondary objective of detecting those motorists who continue to engage in this behaviour (drink drivers).

For the past two decades, New Zealand's drink drive enforcement has been underpinned by Homel's model of deterrence, with key emphasis on the principles of high visibility drink drive enforcement that targets a high volume of motorists. Predominantly this is achieved through compulsory breath testing of motorists at alcohol checkpoints. In large part, these checkpoints have been operated by road policing staff situated within specialist alcohol enforcement teams, and has generally tended to focus on the urban environment, where these objectives can be delivered.

The rural environment, in contrast, has tended to receive less deterrence-based drink drive enforcement for a myriad of reasons, thus providing rural residents with opportunities to drink drive with little risk of detection. While rural areas have become more frequently subjected to drink drive enforcement in the past few years, with the introduction of specialist external drink drive teams, there are a number of features of the rural environment which limits the effectiveness of *any* drink drive enforcement. This paper seeks to briefly outline the difficulties (and related issues) of conducting effective rural drink drive enforcement.

Method

This paper draws on international literature, interview data and fieldwork to discuss these key strategic issues.

Discussion:

Enforcing against rural drink driving is difficult on a number of levels, and there are a number of key strategic issues that need to be considered if the enforcement is to be effective. What follows is a brief overview of some of the main issues which impact on the delivery and effectiveness of drink drive enforcement in the rural environment.

1. Who should conduct the enforcement?

A key issue with rural drink drive enforcement is determining who can conduct the enforcement most effectively - local (rural) officers or external drink drive teams? While both approaches have clear advantages and disadvantages, the primary determinants appear to be who has access to the greatest resources, who can detect offenders more effectively, and who can increase residents' risk perceptions the most? If drink drive enforcement is conducted by external teams, what enforcement occurs in their absence? In contrast, if the enforcement relies solely on the local officer, are there sufficient opportunities for conducting the enforcement, and what effect might it have on the police-community relationship if local residents are apprehended?

2. Resource availability

Because there tend to be fewer resources available to rural officers (in terms of staff or equipment), the opportunity for conducting enforcement is necessarily restricted. If rural drink drive enforcement is to be effective, then rural residents need to believe the message that they can be caught "anywhere, anytime." This is, however, a difficult message to sell in areas that have traditionally been subject to little drink drive enforcement, and to areas that currently receive only intermittent enforcement. There are also more specific issues relating to how these resources are deployed at the local level, and whether they can be utilised more effectively.

3. Enforcement predictability

While retaining enforcement unpredictability is a major principle underpinning effective drink drive enforcement, there is a proclivity for rural drink drive enforcement to become predictable for a number of reasons: a lack of resources tends to lead to enforcement being conducted on predictable days, at predictable times, at predictable locations, and for predictable durations. The ultimate effect is that while residents' perceptions of the risk of being detected for drink driving may be high for certain days/ times (for example, Friday and Saturdays, 10pm-2am), the low perceived risk outside of these periods can contribute to the incidence of drink driving. While drink drive enforcement can never be conducted on a 24/7 basis - and thus there will always be opportunities for drink driving to occur - the key issue is ensuring that the *lack* of enforcement does not become predictable - thus, ensuring rural residents are less confident that they can avoid detection.

4. Enforcement visibility

Whether the drink drive enforcement utilises high visibility overt strategies, or low visibility covert strategies is inherently linked to the purpose of the enforcement activity - particularly whether it focuses on deterrence or detection? While enforcement activity can incorporate elements of both, the style of enforcement is heavily reliant on its objectives. Overt enforcement focuses primarily on deterring motorists, whereas covert enforcement is principally designed to detect offenders. When drink drive enforcement is conducted in rural areas, there is a propensity to adopt low visibility covert tactics, and this typically involves utilising unmarked police vehicles. Such strategies tend to be considered more appropriate for the rural environment, particularly as a means of counteracting against factors such as the word of mouth (WOM) effect, and also for increasing detection rates.

5. Detection vs. deterrence

While detection-focused enforcement also has general deterrence potential, and deterrence-focused enforcement has the potential for detecting drink drive offenders, a key issue for rural drink drive enforcement is where the emphasis should be primarily placed - detecting specific offenders or deterring

general populations? This is a particularly pertinent issue given that resources are often constrained in rural areas, and that the purpose of the enforcement is intrinsically linked to the style of enforcement utilised.

6. Long term vs. short term deterrence

Another important issue for rural drink drive enforcement (related to the above point) is whether the enforcement is designed to effect short or long term deterrence. While high visibility deterrence-focused enforcement certainly deters rural residents from engaging in drink driving, there is considerable evidence to suggest that this effect rarely lasts beyond the night of the enforcement. In light of resource constraints (among other things) there are strong arguments favouring enforcement that can effect long-term deterrence. There are, however, questions around how this can be best achieved, and considerations around what barriers there may be.

7. Word of mouth (WOM) effect

The word of mouth (WOM) effect essentially refers to the transmission of information about enforcement activity through personal and community networks. Its overall purpose is to assist local residents in avoiding enforcement activity, or to enable driving behaviour to be modified accordingly. While this WOM effect has sometimes been utilised to increase residents' awareness of drink drive enforcement activity - and thus, to deter greater numbers of residents - whether or not this results in long term deterrence is questionable. More commonly, rural drink drive enforcement has sought to counteract against the WOM effect, by utilising low visibility covert enforcement that is specifically designed to detect offenders. In this way, it is anticipated that a longer-term deterrent effect can be achieved, but whether it is effective or not is unknown. What is known is that the WOM effect has obvious implications for the effectiveness of drink drive enforcement activity in rural communities (such as minimising the detection rate), and as such, it is perhaps the most significant issue facing rural drink drive enforcement.

8. Avoidance of enforcement activity

Due to factors such as the WOM effect, rural communities often attempt to counteract against drink drive enforcement activity (predominantly through the use of back roads). While knowledge of enforcement activity certainly informs residents' perceptions of the risk of being detected for drink driving, it can also be utilised by residents as a means of effectively avoiding enforcement activity. However, providing opportunities for rural residents to avoid enforcement activity is clearly problematic if the enforcement is designed to deter and detect drink drivers. Consequently, if rural drink drive enforcement is to be effective, it needs to successfully counteract these avoidance strategies. In short, if rural communities attempt to thwart rural drink drive enforcement, the enforcement in turn needs to prevent, or at least reduce, the opportunities for doing so.

Conclusion

Rural drink driving is a significant road safety issue in New Zealand, accounting for a considerable number of injuries and fatalities annually. While police enforcement clearly plays a significant role in reducing its incidence, there are a number of factors which impede its effectiveness.

There are a number of key strategic issues that need to be considered and compensated for if rural drink drive enforcement is to be effective. The crucial question remains whether these issues can be counteracted against, and more importantly, how? Given that many of these problems are interconnected, it is unlikely that the solution will be simple. The goal clearly is to make rural drink drive enforcement more effective, thus reducing the opportunity for rural communities to avoid enforcement (and thus detection), while at the same time deterring greater numbers of motorists, promoting less drink driving behaviour from occurring, and thus reducing the number of injuries and fatalities sustained on rural roads as a result.