

Process evaluation of the NSW Mandatory Alcohol Interlock Program

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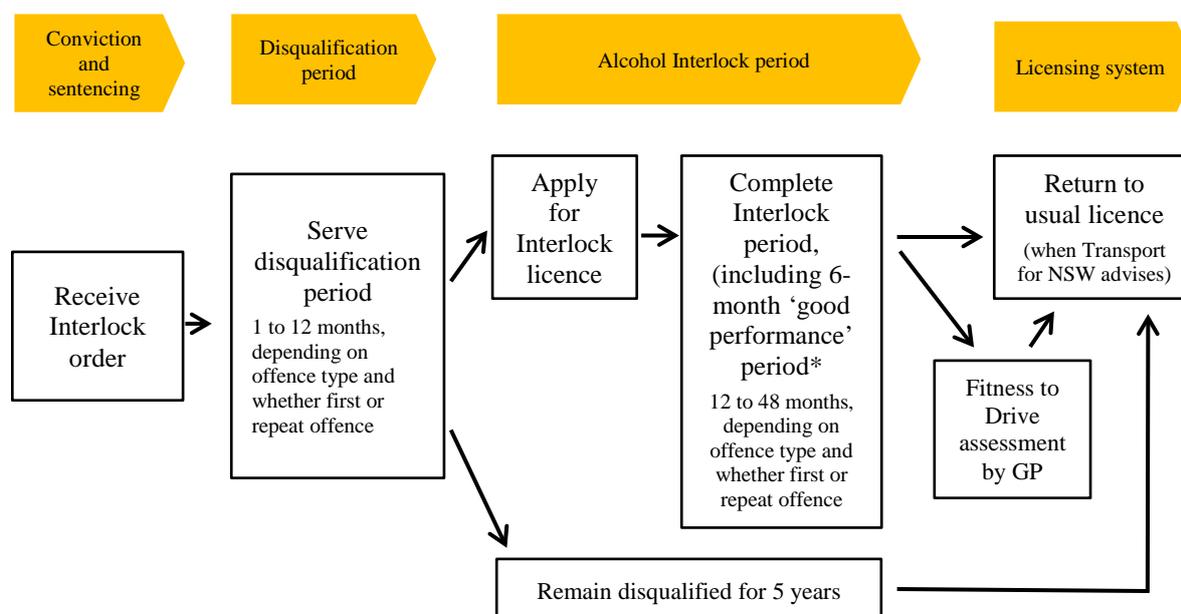
Abstract

A process evaluation of the NSW Mandatory Alcohol Interlock Program aimed to assess program implementation, improve program delivery and refine policy settings. The evaluation found the roll-out was an overall success and sentencing patterns reflected the intent of the legislation. Non-compliance offences were very low (<1%). The participant survey showed 82% of respondents approved of the program, though the take-up rate for the Interlock licence (54%) could be improved. Participants said that the Interlock licence helped them separate drinking from driving and maintain work and family commitments. However, the cost of the device was a common concern.

Background

The NSW Mandatory Alcohol Interlock Program (MAIP) is a court-ordered penalty for all drivers convicted of serious or repeat drink-driving offences. It involves a licence disqualification period followed by an Interlock period. During the Interlock period, a driver must only drive a vehicle installed with an alcohol Interlock device. If the driver takes up the Interlock licence, they may regain their usual licence at the end of the Interlock period. If the driver does not take up the Interlock licence, they remain disqualified for five years. MAIP includes strategies to encourage participants to seek medical help for alcohol problems.

The process evaluation covered the period from program commencement (February 2015) until September 2017.



* Performance is monitored during the Interlock period using data from the Interlock device. If drink drive attempts occur, the participant may receive a warning letter and referral for treatment for alcohol dependency.

Figure 1. Licensing flow chart for the NSW Mandatory Alcohol Interlock Program

Methods

Methods included analysis of de-identified administrative data (n=8500), surveys (n=341) and semi-structured interviews (n=21) with program participants, surveys with service agents (typically auto-electricians) who install and service Interlock devices (n=33), and semi-structured interviews with 30 stakeholders, including companies providing Interlock devices, general practitioners and solicitors.

Results

The evaluation found the roll-out of MAIP was an overall success. Court orders and sentencing patterns reflected the intent of the legislation — more than 70% of orders were for two years, which correlated with the most common offence, driving with a high-range concentration of alcohol. Charges for non-compliance with an Interlock order were very low at 0.8% of MAIP participants.

The participation rate could be improved. As at June 2017, 3,474 people had obtained their Interlock licence, 54% of the 6,376 people who were eligible to apply for the Interlock licence because they had finished their disqualification period (though some of those eligible may have gone on to obtain their licence after June 2017). There were no significant differences in participation by age group, gender or location. There was a trend for lower participation among Aboriginal people, but the difference was not statistically significant. The reasons behind the relatively low overall participation rates are not well understood as it proved difficult to contact those who had not taken up their Interlock licence.

Data from participants was limited to self-reported information from the 25% who responded to the surveys. Among these respondents, 82% approved or strongly approved of the program. Participants reported that MAIP was helping to separate drinking from driving, and this continued (at least in the short term) for the small number who had completed their Interlock licence at the time of the survey. Participants said the Interlock licence helped them maintain work responsibilities (64%) and family commitments (60%). Negatives included social embarrassment: just 18% of participants said the Interlock licence improved their social life compared to being disqualified from driving, while 34% said it was unchanged. There were also limitations for those who drive for work, such as being unable to drive multiple work vehicles. The cost of the Interlock device was a common concern, despite discounts for concession cardholders and extra subsidies for those experiencing severe financial hardship: 80% of respondents disagreed or tended to disagree that installing and maintaining the device was affordable.

Medical referral letters are sent to participants if they repeatedly attempt to use the car when they have alcohol in their system. Among survey participants who visited a doctor after receiving a letter, approximately one-third were referred to specialist alcohol treatment services for further assistance. A low total proportion of participants (3% to 7%) reported receiving specialist alcohol rehabilitation services as a result of medical referral.

The evaluation identified some areas where delivery could be improved. Better communication was needed about pricing structures for Interlock devices and how to obtain an Interlock licence. Simpler and clearer processes for accessing affordability provisions were also required. It was found that better functionality of IT systems would improve data availability for program monitoring. There were some gaps in availability of Interlock service agents in some areas of NSW.

Conclusion

The process evaluation provided valuable information as program implementation progressed. It confirmed that delivery was on track, that Interlock orders had been issued by the Courts as planned, and that Interlock devices were being supplied to participants and working effectively. Identification of some delivery issues led to improved business processes and more user-friendly

materials for participants, including information about affordability provisions. IT system changes are underway. MAIP has now been expanded to include mid-range drink-driving first offences, and the expansion is likely to help fill geographic gaps in Interlock servicing. An outcomes evaluation is planned.

References

ARTD Consultants. (2018). Evaluation of the Mandatory Alcohol Interlock Program: Phase 1 Process Evaluation. Report for the NSW Centre for Road Safety, Transport for NSW, Sydney.