



Understanding the context of alcohol consumption before driving for crash-involved drivers

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Despite a discernable shift in public acceptability of alcohol impaired driving, it continues to be a major contributor to death and serious injuries. High levels of alcohol intoxication are recorded for drivers and riders involved in crashes but little is known about the circumstances surrounding the decision to drive after consuming alcohol. While some research has concentrated on young drivers and college students there are few studies that have addressed this issue in a broader sample of drivers. Investigating the context of alcohol consumption is also timely as drinking patterns can change over time and in response to economic conditions. Original Coroner's case files for fatal crashes in South Australia from 2008 to 2010 were investigated with the aim of understanding the social context and circumstances surrounding alcohol consumption prior to crash involvement for drivers or riders with an illegal BAC. Coroner's files are one of few data sources that can provide detailed information on alcohol consumption prior to a crash. Official traffic offence records of drivers were also reviewed.

Of the 284 fatal crashes included in the study, 34% (n=95) involved a driver or rider with an illegal BAC. The study found that alcohol consumption patterns have changed over time including a shift from drinking in hotel based premises to private homes, particularly in rural and remote areas. Of concern was the very high alcohol levels recorded by drivers, with a mean BAC that was over three times the legal limit and a level of alcohol dependence above the Australian national average. In addition, 23% of drivers were reported to be experiencing psychological issues at the time of the crash. The results confirm that drink driving recidivism continues to be a significant problem with 44% of drivers recording at least one prior alcohol offence. The findings from this study have important implications for the development of drink driving campaigns and interventions and will inform police alcohol enforcement strategies. However, this study also highlights the need for a broader holistic approach to reduce the high levels of alcohol consumption and alcohol dependence underlying drink driving behaviour.