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Results of the fifth national attitude measurement on road safety of the Belgian Road Safety Institute (2015)

Summary

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Meesmann, U. & Schoeters, A. (2016) Quel regard les automobilistes portent-ils sur la sécurité routière ? Résultats de la cinquième mesure nationale d'attitudes en matière de sécurité routière de l'IBSR (2015). Bruxelles, Belgique: Institut Belge pour la Sécurité Routière – Centre de connaissance Sécurité Routière.

Summary

Objective and methodology

The BIVV attitude measurement is based on interviewing 1.537 drivers who are domiciled in Belgium and covered at least 1.500 km while driving a car or van in the past six months preceding the interview. The interviews were conducted orally by interviewers from the consultancy 'Significant GfK' between 07/05/2015 and 17/07/2015.

The attitude measurement contained a number of statements on which respondents could express an opinion. The report describes the evolution of opinions in those cases where the same wording was used for the according statement in previous attitude measurements. Furthermore, each attitude statement was examined as to whether or not there is a relationship between the statement and certain characteristics of the drivers (in particular sex, age and region).

The 2015 attitude measurement included the following topics: driving under the influence of alcohol, speed and speeding, use of seat belt and child restraint systems, distraction due to mobile phone use, respect and support for existing and potential measures.

Key results

Road safety in general

- Road safety is a topic that is a matter of concern to Belgian drivers. More than eight out of ten drivers indicate being (strongly) concerned about traffic accidents. As was the case in the previous attitude measurement in 2012, the concern about traffic accidents is more pronounced than the concern for other social issues such as environmental pollution, crime or unemployment. The concern about traffic accidents is greater in women and Walloon drivers. In the Brussels Capital Region there is more concern about the problem of traffic congestion and environmental pollution. In comparison with other European countries it is notable that Belgians show greater concern towards all social problems - and therefore also road safety - than road users in other countries (ESRA, Torfs, et al., 2016).
- Among the various forms of risky behaviour in traffic, Belgian drivers consider driving at "140 km/h on the motorway when there is no traffic" as being the most acceptable. The least accepted risky driving behaviours are: "driving after taking drugs", "driving without insurance", "carrying children not fastened in the car" and "continue driving when feeling too sleepy"¹.

Driving under the influence of alcohol

- Driving under the influence of alcohol is still relatively frequent in Belgian drivers. In 2015, 12% of the drivers say that they have driven under influence of alcohol (above the legal limit) at least once in the last month. The situation has barely changed compared to the results of the attitude measurements in 2012, 2009 and 2006. We also conclude from the road side surveys that the observed percentage of drivers that are driving under the influence of alcohol show no improvement (Focant, 2016). We find a higher self-reported prevalence in men and Walloon drivers. In terms of age there are no significant differences. International comparisons show us that drivers in Belgium drive more often under the influence of alcohol than in other European countries and this is true both for self-reported behaviour (ESRA, Achermann Stürmer, 2016) and observed behaviour (DRUID, Houwing et al., 2011).
- Only 3% of drivers consider driving under the influence of alcohol as acceptable. This percentage is only slightly different from what was found in the previous measurements. Mainly men and drivers from Brussels indicate more often that they find this behaviour acceptable.

¹ Group differences regarding the acceptability of this dangerous behaviour are discussed in more detail below.

- The fact that driving under the influence leads to an increased risk of accident is acknowledged by 93% of drivers. This percentage is much the same as the previous measurement in 2012. The increased risk is less well known by men and by 39- to 49-year-olds.
- Perceived behavioural control with respect to driving under the influence did not change compared to the previous measurement: 92% of respondents agree that it is difficult to react appropriately in a dangerous situation when driving under the influence of alcohol. Here again we find a lower percentage among male drivers.
- The social norm with regard to driving under the influence has improved slightly, but not significantly compared to 2012: three-quarters of Belgian drivers think that most of their friends or acquaintances find driving under the influence unacceptable. Although no considerable age differences can be perceived with regard to behaviour and attitudes to alcohol, we see that the social norm is considerably better among the two oldest age groups than the younger groups. Besides a higher self-reported prevalence, it also appears that Wallonia has a poorer perception of the social norm: Walloons feel relatively frequently that driving under the influence is accepted in their social environment.

Speed and speeding

- Speed violations still occur frequently: in 2015 almost nine out of ten drivers admit to driving 10 km/h too fast. Most offences happen in the 30 zone: seven in ten drivers admit to driving occasionally 50 km/h. Furthermore, six out of ten drivers admit to sometimes driving 140 km/h on the motorway and slightly more than half admits to driving 70 km/h on occasion in built-up areas. These percentages vary little from the 2012 results. Particularly women, older drivers and the Flemish state that they exceed the speed limit less often. Most other European countries report as many speed violations as Belgium (ESRA, Yannis, et al. 2016).
- "Driving 140 km/h on a highway when there is no traffic" is considered the most acceptable behaviour (38%) among a range of high-risk behaviours in traffic. The other statements relating to speeding vary in acceptability: between 8% (driving 50 km/h where the maximum speed is 30 km/h) and 6% (driving 70 km/h in built-up areas). The acceptability of none of these speeding violations changed significantly compared to 2012. The acceptability of most statements is lower for women and 63-year-olds.
- Three-quarters of drivers agree that driving fast endangers their own life and that of others. With regard to the social norm, only one in six drivers states that he/she finds speeding socially unacceptable. These percentages are not significantly different from those in the 2012 attitude measurement. We note furthermore that women, older drivers and Flemish drivers - besides a lower self-reported behaviour - also have a better perception of risk and a higher social norm.
- Only 67% of drivers admit that it is difficult to react appropriately in a dangerous situation when driving faster than the limit; this percentage did not change significantly compared to 2012. Again, we see a higher percentage of women and older drivers. Walloon drivers in particular agree with this statement.
- In addition, the perceived social norm with regard to speeding hardly changed in comparison with the previous measurement. Six to ten drivers think that most of their friends or acquaintances believe that speed limits should be respected. Higher percentages can also be found among older drivers and the Flemish.
- Nearly six out of ten drivers find that the speed limits have been set at acceptable levels. This percentage is only slightly different from the previous attitude measurements. Women and older drivers more often agree.
- Only 36% of drivers are of the opinion that the accident risk increases when speed increases by 10 km/h. This barely differs from the 2012 result. This percentage is markedly higher in people aged 63 years and above: almost half agrees with this statement.
- One in ten drivers states that people must drive fast because it is otherwise felt that time is lost. This percentage is not significantly different from the previous attitude measurement. Young drivers and Walloons more often agree with this.

Use of seat belt

- The use of seat belt has seen positive progress. Since the 2003 attitude measurement, there has been a significant increase in self-reported seat belt use, although the increase between 2012 and 2015 is not significant. In 2015, considerable differences can still be noted depending on location in the vehicle and seat belt use: seat belt use is 88% among drivers or front passengers, while this is only 62% among rear passengers. Improved self-reported behaviour is noted in women and 63-year-olds. The international ESRA-results furthermore show that Belgian road users are currently performing better with regard to seat belt use than road users in most other European countries (ESRA, Trotta, et al., 2016).
- Not wearing a seat belt in the back of the car is considered unacceptable by 80% of respondents while 91% of respondents consider it unacceptable not to wear a seat belt in the front. Although the acceptability of this behaviour has decreased, there is no significant difference with 2012. The acceptability of not wearing a seat belt in Brussels is higher.
- Eight out of ten drivers state that they always ask their passengers to wear their seat belt; this percentage is only slightly different from the 2012 result. A higher percentage can also be found here among women.
- As was the case in the previous attitude measurement, 12% of drivers believe that it is not necessary to wear a seat belt in the back. This percentage is markedly higher in Brussels drivers (20%).

Use of child restraint systems

- Only 84% of Belgian drivers say that they always carry children in the correct child restraint system. This self-reported prevalence varies little with what was established in 2012. Men, 18- to 29-year-olds and Brussels drivers report less frequently that they always carry children in an appropriate restraint system. The ESRA results also show that Belgium performs better than most other European countries in the use of child restraint systems (Trotta, et al., 2016).
- Although 14% of drivers admit that they do not always carry children in the correct restraint system, this behaviour is strongly condemned by them. Only 1% of drivers finds it acceptable to carry children while not being restrained. This percentage is the lowest among 63-year-olds.
- The risk of incorrect use of child seats is generally recognized: 97% of all respondents agree that it is dangerous to carry a child that is not restrained correctly. The percentage is the lowest in the age group of 30- to 38-year-old drivers and the highest in Wallonia.
- A third of drivers feel that the instructions for the use of child seats are unclear. This percentage has increased slightly but not significantly compared to 2012. The older the driver, the more often he/she agrees with this. This percentage is also higher in Walloon drivers.
- 7% of drivers believe that it is not really necessary to use proper child restraint systems on short trips. In contrast to the self-reported behaviour and acceptability of not restraining children, this statement was supported more by people aged 63 years and above than by the 18- to 29-year-olds.

Distracted driving due to mobile phone use

- Using the mobile phone while driving is still a widespread phenomenon. Most often, drivers admit that they have read an SMS while driving (46%); the percentage that admits having sent an SMS is lower (34%). Hands-free calling is reported more (41%) than calling with a hands-held mobile phone (32%). In general the self-reported use of the mobile phone while driving decreases with age. Hands-free calling is more frequently reported by men and Brussels drivers. Making a call on a hand-held mobile phone is less often reported in Flanders. International comparisons show that Belgians call less often while driving (hands-free and hands-held) but text the same number of messages while driving as drivers from other European countries (ESRA, Trigo, et al., 2016). Despite the high admitted use of mobile phones behind the wheel, the acceptability is very low. Only 2% of drivers find it acceptable to make a call with a hands-held mobile phone or to send an SMS while driving. A higher acceptability is found among young drivers and residents of Brussels.

- 95% of drivers know the increased risk of accident when calling and holding the mobile phone while driving. 91% of drivers believe furthermore that a driver's attention to traffic is reduced when not calling with a hands-free device and only 64% believe that a driver's attention to traffic is reduced when calling hands-free. The perception of risk (for each statement) is lower in men, in young drivers and residents of Brussels.
- Three-quarters of drivers state that almost all motorists occasionally call while holding the mobile phone and driving. This perceived social norm is only slightly different from the result in 2012 and is worse in Walloon drivers.

Enforcement

- The subjective risk of being checked refers to the respondent's personal assessment of the possibility while driving to be checked for a road traffic offence. Respondents perceive speeding as the biggest subjective risk of being checked: a third of drivers believe that chances are good they will be checked for this while on a typical drive. Only one tenth of drivers believe that they will very likely be checked on driving under the influence of alcohol or on wearing a seat belt and only 4% say this about drugs. The subjective risk of being checked in relation to driving under the influence of alcohol has increased significantly compared to 2012 while the subjective risk of being checked in relation to seat belt use has declined significantly. People aged 63 years and above and Walloon drivers experience a lower subjective risk of being checked in relation to speed and alcohol than other drivers. Generally we see in Belgium that the subjective risk of being checked - with the exception of speed checks - is lower than in most other European countries (ESRA, Butler, 2016).
- The objective risk of being checked concerns the effective number of checks in a given time interval. Drivers were asked, how many times they were stopped in the past 12 months by police for a check. The percentage of drivers which have been checked by the police has not changed significantly compared to 2012 and is significantly below the EU average (ESRA, Butler, 2016). The 2015 BIVV attitude measurement shows that 27% of Belgian drivers were checked by police in the past year (this does not include checks by unmanned speed cameras). Women and people aged 63 years and above indicate that they have been checked less frequently.
- In contrast to the general objective risk of being checked reported alcohol checks has increased significantly compared to 2012: in 2015, 20% of drivers state that they had had at least one breathalyser test in the past year (2012: 14%). Moreover, the proportion of Belgian drivers that reports alcohol checks is still below the European average (ESRA, Butler, 2016).
- With regard to sanctions, the percentage of drivers that had to pay a fine in the past year (26%) dropped significantly compared to 2012. Furthermore, 2% of drivers indicate that they were convicted by a court for a traffic violation. Both percentages are higher in Brussels drivers and lower among the two oldest age groups (50- to 62-year-olds and 63 years of age and above).

Support for measures

- There is wide public support for stricter rules for driving under the influence of drugs (84%) and alcohol (70%). Support is lowest for stricter speed limits (37%). Older drivers are generally more in favour of stricter rules. Support for more stringent rules relating to seat belt use is less in Brussels.
- An increase in checks is especially supported when it comes to drugs (72%) and alcohol (63%). Only 56% find that the rules are not sufficiently checked when it comes to wearing seat belts, and less than half of the respondents (44%) say this about speeding offences. The older the people, the more there are calls for an increase in checks. Furthermore, most Walloon drivers feel that the rules are not checked enough.
- The point of view about 'the sanctions being too heavy' is mainly supported when it comes to speeding offences (38%) and the safety belt (26%). Only 9% find the sanctions for driving under the influence of alcohol too heavy, and 6% find this to be the case for drugs. Men and Brussels drivers in particular most often find that the sanctions for certain traffic violations are too heavy.
- With regard to potential new measures, support is greatest for zero tolerance on alcohol for novice drivers (80%). Women and older drivers in particular support this measure. 71% of 18- to 29-year-old drivers in the target group itself agree.

- The compulsory installation of an ignition interlock² for drivers who have already been caught more than once for driving under the influence of alcohol is supported by 77% of drivers. Support is greater among women, older drivers and in Wallonia.
- The driving license with penalty point system is supported by slightly less than half of drivers (45%). Support is greater among older drivers and in Flanders.

Key recommendations

The BIVV attitude measurements provide an insight into the underlying factors of risky driving behaviour. The results help to identify specific target groups and to understand the underlying motivations for risky behaviour. Recommendations on the various traffic safety topics can be drawn from them.

Human behaviour is generally considered as one of the main factors in traffic accidents besides vehicle and infrastructure problems. In order to improve road safety it is therefore necessary to reduce risky traffic patterns. Behaviour can be influenced in several ways. Possible levers are, among others, legislation, enforcement, infrastructure or vehicle-technical changes, education or awareness-raising campaigns. In general, an integrated approach of the various measures leads to the best results in terms of effectiveness (e.g. Delaney et al., 2004).

The following provides a brief overview of the primary target group with respect to the main road safety topics. Furthermore, possible reference points for action are highlighted, focussing on measures which aim at changing the underlying (socio-cognitive) motivations for risk behaviour in traffic.

Driving under the influence of alcohol

- Primary target: men but also the general public.
- Possible links: social acceptability and the corresponding social environment (social norm).

Speed and speeding

- Primary target: men, drivers of young and average age, but also the general public.
- Possible links: personal acceptance of speeding, social norm, risk awareness of speeding, increase in the level of support for the applicable speed limits.

Use of seat belt

- Primary target: men, young drivers, but also the general public.
- Possible links: raising awareness of the risks associated with not wearing the seat belt (also in the back of the car).

Use of child restraint systems

- Primary target: the general public; regarding risk perception on short trips and clarity of instructions: older drivers.
- Possible links: correct use of child restraint systems, risk perception of short journeys, clarification of the instructions for the correct use of child restraints (especially for older drivers), awareness-raising for the use of seat belt in general (impact also on the use of child restraints).

Distracted driving due to mobile phone use

- Primary target: young drivers.
- Possible links: raising awareness of the risks (also the risk of hands-free calling) and the social norm.

² Technology that won't let the car start if the driver's alcohol level is over the legal limit.



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