

Transport for NSW | Centre for Road Safety

Drink driving attitudes and behaviours in NSW

Summary Report
June 2020



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1 Key findings

This document provides a summary of the final report of the research into drink driving attitudes and behaviours in NSW in 2019. High-level key findings include:

- The prevalence of drink driving ('knowingly' or 'might have') has increased over the last five years, with 25 per cent of NSW drivers stating they had drink driven in the last six months, up from 18 per cent in 2014.
- Both males and females aged 16-25 had a high prevalence of drink driving, with 39 per cent having done so in the last six months. Prevalence was particularly high for both males and females in metro areas (38% and 35% respectively), and females in regional areas (50%).
- Males aged 16-25 were more likely to have drink driven 'knowingly', especially in the last month, with seven per cent having done so two to three times in the last month, compared with only one per cent of all NSW drivers. They displayed higher levels of overconfidence, and were less likely to: plan ahead to not drive home when drinking, be concerned about their social image, be deterred by drink driving penalties, and think they would get caught for driving over the legal blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit.
- Drink drivers differed from all NSW drivers on a number of drink driving attitudes and behaviours. For example, drink drivers were less likely to plan ahead when going out and drinking, and were more likely to justify drink driving in certain situations (such as when the distance is short or when they need the car the next morning).
- In general, there is high visibility of random breath testing (RBT) in NSW, with 83% of NSW drivers agreeing that RBT is unpredictable and they can get tested any place and any time. However drink drivers were less likely to feel at risk of getting caught than all NSW drivers (57% 'somewhat likely' or 'very likely', vs. 62% overall).
- Compared to all drivers, drink drivers were more likely to be aware of the penalties available for NSW drink driving offences, were less likely to approve of the penalties, and were more likely to say they would make them a lot less likely to risk drink driving.
- When asked their opinion of lowering the legal BAC limit, 36 per cent of NSW drivers approved of lowering it to .02 and 23 per cent approved of lowering it to zero. Approval was lower for drink drivers (30 per cent and 21 per cent respectively).
- Metropolitan and regional driver populations showed similar responses for the majority of measures. However metropolitan drivers were more likely to catch public transport when drinking and more likely to leave a drinking venue later at night, while regional drivers were more likely to drink at services or sporting clubs and be living closer to their final drinking venue. Regional drivers were more likely to be deterred by drink driving penalties, perhaps reflecting their greater reliance on the car.

2 Background

2.1 Alcohol related trauma in NSW

'Drink driving', or driving when over the legal blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limit, remains a prominent road safety issue in NSW. Overall, from 2014 to 2018 combined, there were 275 fatalities from crashes involving alcohol, and 1,951 people were seriously injured. It contributed to 15 per cent of all road fatalities between 2014 and 2018 and seven per cent of all serious injuries in the same period.

While alcohol-related road fatalities have trended downward since the 1980s (389 people killed in alcohol-related crashes in 1980, compared with 45 in 2015), this trend has appeared to flatten or increase slightly over more recent years (59 fatalities in 2016 and 66 in 2018). The same is true for alcohol-related serious injuries.

2.2 Key measures to address drink driving in NSW

NSW has a number of initiatives which aim to deter people from driving with an illegal BAC level, as well as programs to assist repeat offenders to change their attitudes and behaviours.

Tiered blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limits

NSW has three blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limits, which are based on the category of a driver's licence and the type of vehicle they are driving:

- Zero BAC – for learner, provisional 1 and provisional 2 drivers/riders, as well as visiting drivers/riders holding an overseas or interstate learner, provisional or equivalent licence.
- Under 0.02 – for drivers of "gross vehicle mass" greater than 13.9 tonnes, of vehicles carrying dangerous goods, or of public vehicles such as taxis and bus drivers.
- Under 0.05 – for all other licence classes not subject to a lower limit.

Random breath testing

Random breath testing started in 1982. Since then, trauma from fatal crashes involving alcohol has dropped from about 40 per cent of all fatalities to the 2017 level of 15 per cent. NSW Police conduct about 5 million breath tests each year in NSW.

Penalties for drink driving

There are a number of penalties for drink driving in NSW including loss of licence, fines, imprisonment, vehicle impounding and a requirement to install an alcohol interlock device.

As part of the Road Safety Plan 2021, penalties were strengthened to further deter drink driving and reduce alcohol related trauma on NSW roads. Changes included:

- the introduction of penalty and suspension notices in lieu of mandatory court attendance for lower range drink and drug driving first offenders, and increases in maximum court-issued fines for first and subsequent offences in this range (effective 20 May 2019)
- the extension of mandatory alcohol interlocks to mid-range drink driving first offenders (effective 3 December 2018)

- the option for vehicle sanctions at the roadside for high risk drink driving offenders (effective 3 December 2018)

Sober Driver Program

The Sober Driver Program is a 20 hour group program that helps change the attitudes and behaviours of repeat and high risk drink drive offenders, reducing their likelihood of further offences. In NSW the Sober Driver Program is only available to convicted drink drive offenders who are subject to the supervision of Community Corrections or those who are subject to interlock exemption orders.

Advertising campaigns

Transport for NSW runs a number of education and awareness campaigns to engage the community and help change unsafe behaviours on the roads, including drink driving. The *Plan B* drink driving campaign is about making positive choices to get home safely after a night out. The main message of the campaign is if you are drinking, don't drive. You need to have a Plan B to get home.

3 About the research

The Centre for Road Safety commissioned Ipsos Public Affairs Pty. Ltd. to undertake research into drink driving attitudes and behaviours in NSW. This research is part of a series of NSW drink driving attitudinal research, with the most recent iterations conducted in 2014 and 2007. This summary report presents the key findings of this research.

3.1 Objectives

The main objective of this research was to gain a better understanding of drink driving attitudes and behaviours among the NSW driver population, and more specifically to:

- determine the current prevalence of drink driving in NSW
- understand the current knowledge, attitudes and self-reported behaviours towards drink driving, and identify differences by drink driving prevalence
- understand perceptions of and attitudes towards enforcement
- understand knowledge of and attitudes towards penalties for drink driving offences, and their effect on deterrence, and
- explore perceptions of current messaging around drink driving.

3.2 Methodology

Previous iterations of this research were conducted using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), while the current study was conducted via an online questionnaire. To account for this difference, a series of N=400 CATI interviews was conducted and used to calibrate the 2007 and 2014 data to allow for comparisons of data over time.

The online questionnaire was completed in April 2019 by 2,133 respondents aged 16 and over, all of whom were NSW licenced drivers who drove at least once every three months and consumed alcohol at least once a month. There were quotas on age, gender and location (metropolitan v regional) to ensure a representative sample of the NSW driving population.

Throughout this report, the findings are presented both for the entire NSW driving population, and with comparisons by age, gender, location (metropolitan vs. regional) and whether they said they had driven over the legal BAC limit in the last six months ('drink drivers').

4 Overview of findings

4.1 Definitions

It should be noted respondents were asked if they had driven when they were over the legal BAC limit for their licence class, both in the last six months and at any time in their life. For both questions they were asked if they had done so 'knowingly' they were over the limit, and also if they had done so when they thought they might have been over the limit. Throughout this report, the term 'drink drivers' refers to those that responded yes to at least one of 'knowingly' and 'might have', in the last six months. Both groups ('knowingly' and 'might have') were combined to provide a more meaningful analysis as they displayed similar attitudes.

4.2 Prevalence of drink driving

Overall, 51 per cent of NSW drivers reported that they had drink driven in their lifetime, compared with 55 per cent in 2014. This compares with 25 per cent of NSW drivers who reported that they had drink driven in the last six months, up from 18 per cent in 2014.

The self-reported prevalence varied between population groups (see Figure 1 below). Those with the highest prevalence of drink driving in the last six months included:

- regional females aged 16-25 (50 per cent)
- regional males aged 26-39 (40 per cent)
- metropolitan males aged 16-25 (38 per cent)
- regional males aged 40-49 (35 per cent) and
- metropolitan females aged 16-25 (35 per cent).

Figure 1: Prevalence of drink driving by gender, location, age and recency (% within each group)

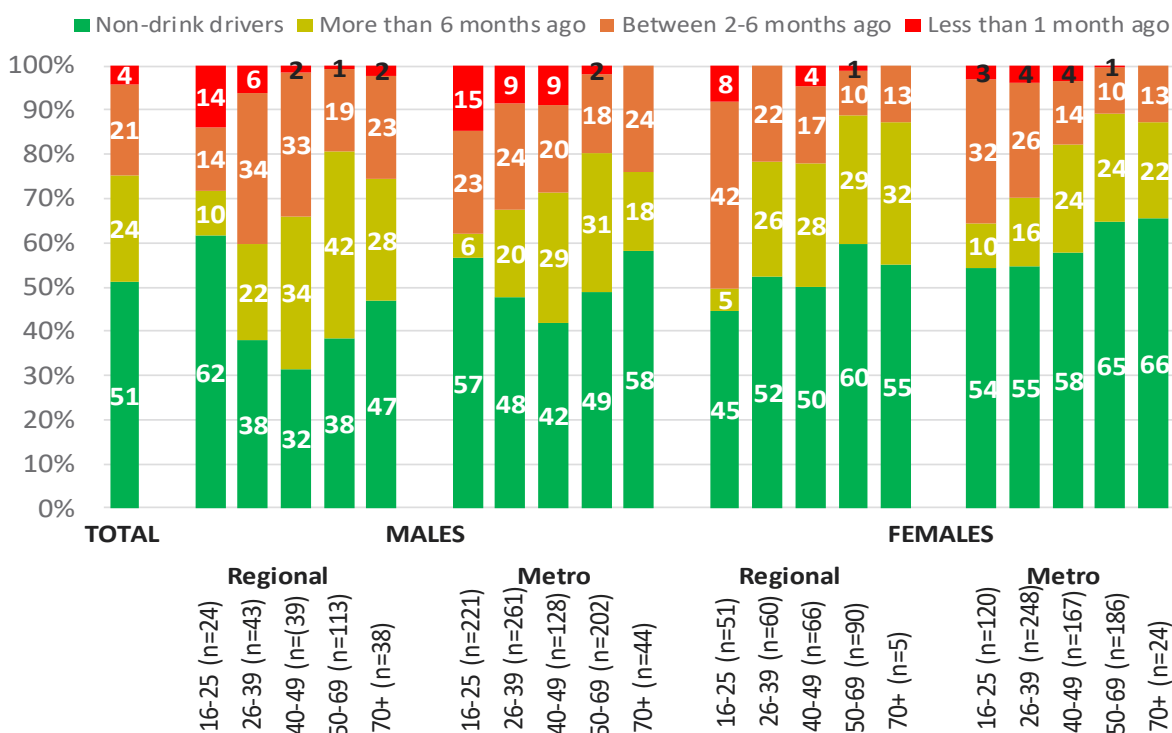


Table 1 shows that certain female population groups with a high self-reported prevalence of drink driving (e.g. regional females aged 16-25), accounted for only a small proportion of all alcohol-related FSI crashes in 2014-2018. Conversely, certain male population groups with a low self-reported prevalence of drink driving (e.g. regional males aged 16-25), accounted for a large proportion of all alcohol-related FSI crashes in 2014-18. This may suggest that males are less likely to report that they might have been over the BAC limit at low levels when they are unsure, are less honest in self-reporting overall, or are driving at higher levels over the BAC limit than females, resulting in a greater crash risk and higher number of FSI crashes.

Table 1: Comparison of self-reported drink driving prevalence compared with contribution to alcohol-related FSI crashes 2014-18 for certain population groups

Population Group	Self-reported drink driving prevalence <i>Rank and prevalence (1 = highest prevalence)</i>	Contribution to alcohol-related FSI crashes 2014-18 <i>Rank and proportion (1 = highest proportion of FSI crashes)</i>
Regional females aged 16-25	1 (50%)	11 (2.9%)
Regional males aged 26-39 (40%)	2 (40%)	1 (17.8%)
Metropolitan males aged 16-25 (38%)	3 (38%)	4 (9.5%)
Regional males aged 40-49 (35%)	4 (35%)	5 (8.6%)
Metropolitan females aged 16-25 (35%)	5 (35%)	14 (1.5%)
Metropolitan males aged 26-39 (33%)	6 (33%)	3 (10.1%)
Metropolitan females aged 26-39 (30%)	7 (30%)	12 (2.1%)
Metropolitan males aged 40-49 (29%)	8 (29%)	7 (4.5%)
Regional males aged 16-25 (28%)	9 (28%)	2 (17.4%)

4.3 Avoiding drink driving

Reasons to not drink drive

The main reasons that NSW drivers said that they would not drink drive were because of concerns about safety rather than enforcement. The most common reasons were: it is unsafe/dangerous (42%), the risk of crashing and hurting/killing themselves or others (42%), the risk of losing their licence (10%) or because it's illegal (10%).

Strategies to avoid drink driving

When considering all methods used (respondents could choose multiple), the top two most popular types of methods to avoid drink driving were:

- arranging some form of non-driving transport (i.e. 'not drink at all if driving', 'nominate a driver to stay under the limit', 'use public transport', 'organise a lift', 'catch a taxi/rideshare' and 'walk') – 88 per cent of all NSW drivers, and
- limiting their drinking in some way (i.e. 'limit drinks to stay under the limit', 'drink low alcohol drinks', 'stop drinking early') – 62 per cent of all NSW drivers.

For the main method used to avoid drink driving, the top three were:

- not drink at all if driving (18%)
- limit drinks to stay under the limit (17%), and
- take a taxi / rideshare (13%).

Drink drivers were more likely than NSW drivers overall to say they avoid drink driving by 'judging how they feel' (22% vs. 10%)

Self-operated breath testers

Overall 13 per cent of NSW drivers reported that they had ever used a self-operated breath tester. This was more likely for drink drivers (22%) and non-urban regional drivers (33%). 92 per cent of all NSW drivers said a self-operated breath tester would stop them from driving if it said they were over the limit, compared with only 86 per cent of drink drivers.

4.4 Characteristics of the most recent drinking occasion

NSW drivers who said they drove home over the limit on their most recent drinking occasion ("recent drink drivers") were more likely than all NSW drivers to:

- have been at their workplace before going out (31% vs. 11%)
- have personally driven to get to where they were drinking (87% vs. 35%), and
- have indicated that they lived or were staying more than 10km from the last venue they visited (41% vs. 32%, although not statistically significant due to small base size for recent drink drivers).

Drink driving appears to be more common between midnight and 3am, with 20 per cent of those who drink drove on their most recent drinking occasion leaving their final venue to go back home at this time, compared to 10% of all NSW drivers.

The main reasons for driving home even though they were over the limit, were: it was the quickest way (23%), I couldn't/didn't want to leave the car (20%) or it was the cheapest way (16%).

4.5 Situational-related attitudes towards drink driving

Situational factors such as driving short distances, on quiet roads or when one needed the car the next morning were strongly related to drink driving behaviour. For example, drink drivers were less likely to disagree with certain statements relating to undesirable behaviour, including:

- "If I was a bit over the limit I would still drive home if it wasn't far" (36% vs. 68% of all NSW drivers).
- "If you're a bit over the limit, driving home on quiet roads is okay" (53% vs. 76% of all NSW drivers).
- "Sometimes I need to drive home after drinking because I need the car the next morning" (41% vs. 64% of all NSW drivers).
- "I would drive over the limit if it was the only way for me to get home" (51% vs. 73% of all NSW drivers).
- "If I'm only driving myself I'm more likely to take bigger risks with alcohol (47% vs. 70% of all NSW drivers).
- "Even though I may be over the legal limit, I know that I can still control the car" (45% vs. 65% of all NSW drivers).

- “Although I’m planning to drink, I usually take the car when I go out and then just see what happens” (55% vs. 72% of all NSW drivers).

For many of these attitudes, disagreement has decreased slightly since 2007, however for most, agreement has also decreased. This has been offset by an increase in those who neither agree nor disagree. However, additionally, strong disagreement has increased. This indicates more polarising opinions than previously with people either moving towards a strong opinion or unsure/ no opinion.

In comparison to situational attitudes, social norming, perceptions of enforcement and safety factors had more limited associations with drink driving behaviour. Attitudes regarding these areas were almost entirely positive (in line with desirable behaviours), with little difference in these attitudes between drink drivers and non-drink drivers.

4.6 Perceptions towards enforcement

Overall 83 per cent of all NSW drivers agree that “Random Breath Testing (RBT) is unpredictable and I can get breath tested anyplace and anytime”. Agreement was lower for drink drivers (74 per cent), Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders (60 per cent) and Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) respondents (70 per cent).

Drink drivers are less likely to feel at risk of getting caught (57 per cent ‘somewhat’ or ‘very’ likely vs. 62 per cent overall). The main reasons they gave for this are:

- RBT is not done very often in my area (36% of drink drivers)
- I never see police doing RBT in my area (30% of drink drivers), and
- luck (29% of drink drivers).

The visibility of and frequency of being stopped for RBT has increased since 2007. In particular, the proportion of NSW drivers that had not seen an RBT in the last six months has declined from 22 per cent in 2007 to 9 per cent in 2019, and the proportion of drivers who said they were stopped by police for an RBT once or twice in the last six months increased from 44 per cent in 2007 to 57 per cent in 2019.

NSW drivers were more likely to say the last RBT they saw was a roadside RBT (69%) compared with mobile RBT (27%). Since 2007 there has been an increase in those seeing roadside RBT (from 58% to 69%) and a decrease in seeing mobile RBT (from 35% to 27%).

Despite 51 per cent of NSW drivers admitting they had drink driven in their lifetime (knowingly or ‘might have’), only 7 per cent said they had ever been caught drink driving. Drink drivers were more likely to have ever been caught drink driving (15%).

4.7 Drink driving penalties

In general, approval of penalties was quite high, with greater approval from all NSW drivers compared with drink drivers, and for more serious offences. For all penalties investigated, drink drivers were more likely to be aware of the penalty than all NSW drivers, and more likely to be deterred by them. Awareness of penalties was generally quite low, indicating there could be a benefit in increasing awareness through education and campaigns, which would better harness the deterrent effect.

Table 2: Awareness, approval and deterrent effect of various drink driving penalties, by drink driving status

Penalty	Awareness		Net approval (strongly + somewhat approve)		Would make me "a lot less likely to risk drink driving"	
	All NSW drivers	Drink drivers	All NSW drivers	Drink drivers	All NSW drivers	Drink drivers
MAIP – High risk offenders	56%	62%	86%	82%	29%	45%
MAIP – First time mid-range offenders	16%	24%	64%	56%	29% (MAIP for either high risk or first time, mid-range)	45% (MAIP for either high risk or first time, mid-range)
Number plate confiscation & vehicle impounding	28%	34%	86%	81%	30%	51%
Roadside licence loss & on-the-spot fine for first time mid-range offenders*	21%	27%	61%	56%	32%	54%

*The questionnaire was administered prior to the introduction (and associated media and awareness strategy) of this penalty.

Thirty-six per cent of NSW drivers approved of lowering the legal BAC limit to .02 and 23 per cent approved of lowering the limit to zero. Approval was lower from drink drivers (30 per cent and 21 per cent respectively, see Table 3 below).

Table 3: Disapproval of lowering the legal BAC limit to 0.02 and zero, by drink driving status

Lowering the BAC	Net disapproval (somewhat or strongly disapprove)	
	All NSW drivers	Drink drivers
Lowering BAC to .02	45%	54%
Lowering BAC to 0	64%	68%

4.8 Drink driving messaging

Drink driving messaging continues to be broadcast in NSW through various channels such as television, radio and online. Forty-seven per cent of NSW drivers recalled seeing or hearing road safety messages about drink driving recently. This was higher for males aged 16-25 (56%), novice drivers (55%) and drink drivers (51%). The most common drink driving safety messages recalled were generic, with almost one in three (30%) describing these as "don't drink and drive" or "don't drive when over the limit." This was followed by "you will get caught" (15%) and "drink driving is dangerous /causes crashes / can kill" (14%).

4.9 Young male drivers

Young males aged 16-25 have historically high rates of drink driving. Based on this they were oversampled in the current study to allow more detailed analysis of their drink driving attitudes and behaviours.

Young males aged 16-25 differed from all NSW drivers in a number of areas. They were:

- more likely to have drink driven ‘knowingly’ especially in the last month – seven per cent had drink driven 2-3 times in the last month (vs 1% of all NSW drivers) and 10 per cent had done so once in the last month (versus 5% of all drivers)
- less likely to plan not to drink drive – only 60 per cent disagreed with the statement “Although I’m planning to drink, I usually take the car when I go out and then just see what happens”, compared with 72 per cent of all NSW drivers
- more likely to display overconfidence – 23 per cent agreed “If you’re a bit over the limit, driving home on quiet roads is okay” (vs. 10% of all drivers)
- less likely to be concerned about their social image – only 69 per cent agreed “I would feel ashamed and embarrassed if I ever got caught drink driving” (vs. 84% of all drivers)
- less likely to think they will get caught:
 - 26 per cent agreed “Even if I drink it is unlikely I will get caught” (vs. 14% of all drivers)
 - 18 per cent agreed “I know when and where the RBT operations occur and I will be able to avoid them (vs. 8% of all drivers)
- less likely to be deterred by drink driving penalties – only 64 per cent agreed “I am worried that if I get caught drink driving I will lose my licence” (vs. 80% of all drivers)

4.10 Differences between metropolitan and regional drivers

Metropolitan and regional driver populations were similar to each other for the majority of measures. Notable differences included the following:

Those living in metropolitan areas (Sydney, Wollongong, Newcastle) were more likely to say that they ‘use public transport’ as the main method to avoid driving over the legal BAC limit (11% vs. 8% of all NSW drivers).

On their last drinking occasion:

- regional drivers were more likely to have gone to services of sporting clubs compared with all NSW drivers (24% vs. 18%)
- metro drivers were more likely to catch public transport to the venue (17% vs. 12% of all NSW drivers and 3% of regional drivers) and from the venue (15% vs. 11% of all NSW drivers)
- regional drivers were more likely to be staying or living closer to the last venue they drank at (15% less than 1km and 39% between 1-5kms), while metro drivers were more likely to use venues further away (36% over 10kms).

Drink driving enforcement and penalties appear to be more effective deterrents among regional drivers, perhaps reflecting their greater reliance on their car. For example, 62 per cent strongly agreed that “I am worried that if I get caught drink driving I will lose my licence” (vs. 57% of all NSW drivers).

Further, 31 per cent strongly agreed that the risk of having to use an alcohol interlock device stops them from drink driving (vs. 26% of all NSW drivers). Awareness of the Mandatory Alcohol Interlock Program (MAIP) for repeat and high-range drink drivers was higher in regional areas (67%) when compared to all NSW drivers (56%). However, awareness of extending the MAIP to first-time mid-range drink drivers was similar to all NSW drivers (18% vs. 16%).

Regional drivers were more likely to say that they would not drive if a self-operated breath tester said that they were over the limit (96%), compared with all NSW drivers (92%).

Interestingly, for females aged 16-25, drink driving in the last six months was higher for regional drivers (50% vs. 35% for metro); but for males aged 16-25, drink driving in the last six months was higher for metro drivers (38% vs. 28% regional).

4.11 Older drivers (70 years and over)

As the number of older people (aged over 70 years) in NSW increases, so does the number of older drivers in NSW. Accordingly, it is important to understand if there are any differences in drink driving attitudes and behaviours for this group.

Older drivers did not appear to differ significantly from all NSW drivers in most areas. Key differences included:

- to avoid drink driving, older drivers were more likely than all NSW drivers to limit drinks to stay under the limit (28% vs. 17%) and less likely to use alternate modes of transport such as public transport (2% vs. 8%) or catching a taxi/rideshare (4% vs. 13%)
- older drivers tended to be less likely to take risks with drink driving:
 - 58 per cent strongly disagreed “Even though I may be over the legal limit, I know that I can still control the car” (vs. 42%)
 - 67 per cent strongly disagreed “If you’re a bit over the limit, driving home on quiet roads is okay” (vs. 52%)
 - 60 per cent strongly disagreed “If I was a bit over the limit I would still drive home if it wasn’t far” (vs. 46%)
- older drivers were more likely to think they will get caught if they drink and drive:
 - 57 per cent strongly disagreed “even if I drink and drive it is unlikely I’d get caught” (vs. 40% of all NSW drivers)
 - 73 per cent strongly disagreed “I know when and where RBT operations occur, and I will be able to avoid them” (vs. 52%), and
- older drivers were more likely to strongly endorse the following drink driving penalties:
 - MAIP for high-risk offenders (84% strongly approved vs. 65% of all NSW drivers)
 - number plate confiscation and vehicle impounding (80% strongly approved vs. 62% of all NSW drivers).

5 Conclusions

Concerningly, the proportion of NSW drivers reporting they have driven over the legal BAC limit in the last six months (either 'knowingly' or 'might have') has increased from 18 per cent in 2014 to 25% in 2019. This was particularly high for those aged 16-25, with 39 per cent having done so in the last six months, including 50 per cent of females in regional areas. Those that had done so ('drink drivers') were more likely than all NSW drivers to rely on judging how they feel to determine if they are over the limit, less likely to plan ahead and more likely to display overconfidence.

A number of negative attitudes appear to differentiate between drink drivers and all NSW drivers, with drink drivers being more likely to justify drink driving in certain situations, such as when the distance is short, they need the car the next morning, it is the only way to get home, or they are alone. These situational factors had a stronger relationship with drink driving than factors such as social norming, perceptions of enforcement and safety, suggesting behaviour change and communications campaigns should focus on these aspects.

There were high levels of support overall for drink driving penalties, although drink drivers displayed slightly lower levels of support. The deterrent effect of each penalty appeared to be greater for drink drivers than all NSW drivers. Awareness of penalties was generally quite low, indicating there could be a benefit in increasing awareness through education and campaigns, which would better harness the deterrent effect. There was significant disapproval for lowering the BAC limit, suggesting public education is required about the risks of driving even with low BAC levels.

NSW drink driving campaigns are being reviewed in line with these findings and changes will be made to target situational-related attitudes, and increase awareness of the new penalties. The findings from this study will also be used to inform ongoing behaviour change programs. Further research is recommended to better understand the high prevalence of drink driving in females aged 16-25, to inform targeted campaigns and programs for this group.

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