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National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund

DRUG USE AND DRIVING AMONG INJECTING DRUG USERS.

NDLERF MONOGRAPH

Darke, Kelly & Ross (2003).

Plain English summary and implications for police prepared by Roger Nicholas.

Aims and Methodology

Three hundred injecting drug users (IDUs) from the greater Sydney region were interviewed regarding their drug driving behaviour. The researchers examined: the extent to which the repondents have driven while affected by drugs; their experience of drug-related motor vehicle crashes; factors which are likely to be associated with drug driving; and, the perceptions held by IDUs concerning the risks associated with drug driving.

Key findings:

- Of those who had ever driven, 87% reported having done so soon after using drugs and 59% of current drivers reported having done so in the last month. The gender of the IDUs did not influence the likelihood of them drug driving.
- The drugs that were most commonly used before driving in the preceding year were: cannabis (57%), heroin (56%), amphetamines (34%), cocaine (33%), and other opioids[1] (32%). Of those who had driven in the past 12 months, 22% reported having driven soon after using heroin on at least a weekly basis. The most common reasons given for drug driving were: to get home after obtaining drugs (28%), to get around (26%), to give others a lift (11%) and to obtain drugs (11%). Eighty eight percent of drivers reported drug driving while carrying passengers, with 77% of current drivers reporting having drug driven with passengers in the previous 12 months.
- Thirty two percent of drivers reported having an accident while drug driving, with a higher proportion of males reporting having done so (36% as compared to 24% of females). One in ten current drivers reported having had an accident while drug driving in the previous year. The most common drugs used before the last drug driving accident were heroin (53%), cannabis (46%) and alcohol (42%). Fifteen percent of the drivers reported having been injured in an accident while drug driving and 8% reported that another person had been injured in one of these drug driving accidents.
- Eighty nine percent of respondents had been a passenger of a drug driver with 30% having done so at least weekly in the previous 12 months. Forty two percent of respondents had been in an accident whilst being driven by a drug driver, and one in ten had been in such an accident in the past 12 months. Overall, 17% of respondents who had been a passenger of a drug driver in the preceding year had been involved in an accident.

1 Opioids are a group of drugs that includes heroin, morphine, methadone, oxycodone.

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- Alcohol was perceived by the IDUs to be the most dangerous substance in terms of driving performance, followed by hallucinogens[2], benzodiazepines[3] and heroin. They perceived cannabis, amphetamines and cocaine to be the least dangerous. Generally, the IDUs who drove while affected by drugs considered drug driving to be less dangerous than did other IDUs.
- Forty one percent of the sample believed it likely that they would be caught for drug driving. Drug drivers perceived the risk of getting caught as being lower than other IDUs.
- Drug driving IDUs had higher levels of dependence on their drug of choice, higher frequency of drug use and more extensive polydrug use[4]. Drug drivers were also significantly more likely to have used a drug in a car in the last 12 months and to have injected a drug in the past 12 months.
- Overall, the picture of a typical drug driving IDU is of a heavily dependent polydrug user who drives frequently.
- Drug driving does not appear to be related to psychological distress or to personality disorder and appears to have been almost normalised among IDUs.
- Enrolment in drug treatment did not reduce the rate of drug driving.

Implications for police

The degree to which this group of IDUs drove while affected by drugs, and were involved in accidents, is startling. This group cannot be said to be representative of all illicit drug users or indeed all injecting drug users. Nevertheless, although small in number in terms of the total population of drivers, this is clearly a high-risk group so far as their likelihood to injure themselves and other road users is concerned.

Presumably, this group of drug drivers will be among those drug-affected drivers who are detected by random drug testing procedures in those jurisdictions which have implemented these. The extent to which this could be expected to increase the perceptions among this group of the likelihood of being detected for drug driving, and in turn influence drug driving behaviour, is unclear. As the research found, IDUs who drug drive have a lower perception of the risks involved than do IDUs who do not drug drive.

The researchers suggested that there could be benefit in education campaigns that target IDUs concerning the dangers of drug driving. Drug treatment providers would be well placed to undertake this work, particularly in the context that at present, drug treatment does not impact upon rates of drug driving.

2 Hallucinogens are drugs or chemical that causes a person to have hallucinations. These include mescaline, LSD, and psilocybin.

3 Benzodiazepines are a group of sedative drugs commonly prescribed for conditions such as insomnia and anxiety. Included in this group are drugs such as Valium(tm) (diazepam), Serapax(tm) (oxazepam), and Normison(tm) (temazepam).

4 Polydrug use refers to the use of multiple different kinds of drugs.

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