



Psychosocial determinants of road traffic offences in a sample of Spanish male prison inmates



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ABSTRACT

Objective: There is very little information available about the characteristics of drivers convicted for traffic offences. The objective of this study was to perform a comparative analysis of the psychosocial characteristics of Spanish prison inmates convicted of road traffic offences (CRTOS), drivers serving a prison sentence for other types of offence (DCOOs), and drivers with no criminal record (DNCRs), in order to identify the psychosocial predictors associated with RTOs.

Methods: The study sample comprised 434 male participants divided into three groups: CRTO ($n = 240$); DCOO ($n = 85$); and DNCR ($n = 105$). Instruments included an interview on sociodemographic data, driving behaviour, and past offences, as well as a set of tests to evaluate personality traits (ZKPQ-50CC), driving-related aspects (MDSI-S and DAS), and alcohol dependence (AUDIT).

Results: A logistic regression analysis showed the following to be reliable predictors of RTOs: low education level ($p < .05$); having been involved in several road traffic accidents ($p < .001$); having received several fines ($p < .001$); a high score on the MDSI-S Risky subscale ($p < .05$); a low score on the MDSI-S Careful subscale ($p < .05$); AUDIT scores > 8 ($p < .05$), and repeatedly driving whilst under the influence of alcohol ($p < .05$).

Conclusions: The results obtained have significant practical implications for designing and implementing traffic offenders programmes.

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1. Introduction

Road traffic accidents and driving offences are two major social and health problems that have been increasingly addressed by the scientific community in recent decades (Gómez-Fraguela & González-Iglesias, 2010).

Road traffic accidents claim the lives of 1.24 million people every year, and are the 8th most common cause of deaths throughout the world and the main cause of death among young people in the 15–29 age group (WHO, 2014). In 2013, a total of 1680 road deaths occurred in Spain (DGT, 2014), making its road traffic death rate the fifth-lowest in the European Union, and lower than that of countries such as France, Austria, or Belgium, which have long been implementing road safety policies, or other developed countries such as the United States of America, Japan, or Australia (Castillo, Castro, & Fageda, 2014).

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Despite this positive data, road accidents continue to be a major social and health problem, and represent one of the main causes of death among the population under the age of 39 years (DGT, 2014), and the most common cause of acute spinal cord injuries (Trinidad, Cuellar, & Ruíz, 2014).

The publication of crime data by the mass media, victims' associations, and other social groups, along with political and legislative pressure, led to stricter sentencing regulations for road safety offences in Spain (Organic Law 15/2007 of 30th November). As a result of the new regulations, within a space of only 10 years, certain behaviours that were formerly considered misdemeanours were reclassified as criminal offences (e.g., driving with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) over 1.2 g/l, excessive speeding, driving without a valid driver's licence, or reckless driving). This brought an increase in the number of people who received a prison sentence for committing a road traffic offence (hereinafter RTO), hence the need to examine the psychosocial factors involved given that there are no psychosocial data available in Spain on people who have been imprisoned for RTOs (Fiscalía General del Estado, 2015; Herraiz, Chamarro, & Villamarín, 2011).

Road traffic offences are currently defined in Chapter IV of Title XVII, Book II, of the Spanish Criminal Code as follows: (a) driving at a speed that exceeds the speed permitted by law (Criminal Code, Article 379.1); (b) driving whilst under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Criminal Code, Article 379.2); (c) reckless driving (Criminal Code, Article 380); (d) manifestly reckless driving or specifically endangering the life of persons (Criminal Code, Article 381); (e) refusing to submit to the legally established alcohol or drug tests (Criminal Code, Article 383); (f) driving without a valid driving licence, driving whilst licence has been suspended due to accumulated demerit points or by a court order (Criminal Code, Article 384); and (g) causing a serious risk to traffic (Criminal Code, Article 385; for further details, see Organic Law 15/2007 of 30th November, modifying Organic Law 10/1995 of 23rd November, in the Criminal Code (Official State Gazette number 77, dated 31st March). The three most frequent road traffic offences are: driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs (Criminal Code, Article 379.2), which accounted for 63% of RTOs; driving without a valid driving licence, driving whilst licence has been suspended due to accumulated demerit points or by a court order (Criminal Code, Article 384), representing 28% of RTOs; refusing to submit to the legally established alcohol or drug tests (Criminal Code, Article 383, accounting for 6% of RTOs) (Fiscalía General del Estado, 2015).

Traffic offences are generally defined as those involving drink driving, dangerous driving, driving whilst disqualified, and involvement in motor vehicle accidents where an injury or fatality has occurred (Watson, 2002). From a socio-demographic perspective, the majority of traffic offenders are males between 17 and 39 years of age, with low education levels, single, separated, or divorced, with high unemployment rates, and low-skilled jobs (Abdoli et al., 2015; Fujita & Shibata, 2006; Kweon & Kockelman, 2003; Wagenaar, Maldonado-Molina, Ma, Tobler, & Komro, 2007). Further, their offences are usually related to driving under the influence of alcohol and/or drugs (Wagenaar et al., 2007), or antisocial behaviour (Hartos, Eitel, & Simons, 2002), and they normally have a history of other criminal offences and are often repeat offenders (Monras, Aparicio, López, & Pons, 2011a).

Personality traits have been widely studied (Oltedal & Rundmo, 2006) as factors that predispose drivers to commit offences whilst driving, and include: sensation-seeking (Dahlen & White, 2006); impulsiveness (Ryb, Dischinger, Kufera, & Read, 2006); hostility and anger (Stephens & Groeger, 2009); aggressiveness (Lennon & Watson, 2011); neuroticism (Dahlen & White, 2006); locus of control (Holland, Geraghty, & Shah, 2010); type A behaviour pattern (Miles & Johnson, 2003); or courtesy and responsibility (Taubman-Ben-Ari & Yehiel, 2012). Further variables such as perceived vulnerability (White, Cunningham, & Titchener, 2011), health beliefs (Gulliver & Begg, 2007), attitudes (Moan & Rise, 2011), or the subjective norm (LaBrie, Kenney, Mirza, & Lac, 2011) have also been examined using social-cognitive-affective approaches. Similarly, many of the factors mentioned, including personality traits, age, or gender, have been linked to driving styles and road traffic offences (Ozkan & Lajunen, 2005; Poó & Ledesma, 2013).

Although there is an extensive literature on the determinants of road traffic offences, further factors that should be taken into consideration are cross-cultural differences (Wallén, Özkan, Lajunen, & Tzamalouka, 2011). The majority of extant studies were carried out in different social environments and in reference to different road safety laws (Poó, Ledesma, & Montes, 2008). Relatively few studies have included individuals serving a prison sentence for driving offences, who account for an ever-increasing prison population, and in many cases, represent a new profile, i.e., a higher level of social and labour integration, and fewer previous offences (Monras et al., 2011a).

Among the few available studies, Monras, Aparicio, López, and Pons (2011b) report that 88% of Spanish inmates serving a prison term for road traffic offences showed signs of alcohol dependence – in most cases undetected, and high levels of drug use. The study also reported that 72% had criminal records, half of them for violent crimes; nonetheless, most of their study population had families and were in regular employment (76%). Another study conducted by Herraiz et al. (2011), using a sample of 115 inmates serving a prison sentence for road traffic offences at the male prison in Barcelona (Spain), reported that 49.4% met the criteria for alcohol dependence (based on the AUDIT screening test), and 18.26% had previous convictions, mainly related to violent crimes (domestic and general violence). Further, the majority of those convicted for road traffic offences had previous offences of drink driving (63.37%), or driving without a licence, or driving whilst suspended or disqualified (16.83%).

A study conducted by Rose (2000) examined the criminal record of approximately 40,000 British offenders. This author found that 40% of drink drivers, and 78% of disqualified drivers had criminal records, and approximately 50% of dangerous drivers held previous convictions. In another study carried out in Great Britain, Broughton (2003) reported that male drivers who had committed several non-traffic offences were far more likely than non-offenders to commit drink driving or dangerous driving offences. In this study, about a quarter of drivers had criminal records for non-traffic offences.

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