

Young people's perceptions of traffic injury risks, prevention and enforcement measures: A qualitative study

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate young people's perceptions, in Barcelona, Spain, about the evolution, magnitude, causes and determinants of traffic crashes, to describe their opinions on road safety regulations, and to explore their suggestions and proposals.

Interviews were conducted with 43 key informants and 12 focus groups involving 98 participants. Discussion guides were designed to get insight on perceptions of relevance and trends in road traffic injuries, determinants of these, regulations and enforcement, as well as to gather their own ideas for reducing traffic injuries.

Young people are aware that traffic injuries are a relevant and increasingly serious problem. The main determinants identified are: driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol, fatigue, night driving, unsafe infrastructures, age of drivers and lack of public transport alternatives. Young people admit that fines, speed cameras and alcohol breath testing reduce risky driving. They prefer community work to fines. They have a poor image of public administrations in charge of prevention of traffic injuries. They demand information on traffic regulations and politicians' decisions, and a considerable increase in weekend and night time public transport. Effectiveness of interventions to reduce traffic injuries can be improved by taking the recipients' perceptions into account.

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1. Introduction

In Spain road traffic injuries are the leading cause of death and injury among young people and the leading cause in terms of potential years of life lost. Indeed, young male drivers in Spain are more likely to be involved in a car crash than any other sex and age group. Forty-two percent of traffic deaths are related to weekend traffic injuries and alcohol is involved in 36% of traffic related deaths (DGT, 2004).

In recent years, traffic injury prevention has been a priority policy in Southern European countries (WHO, 2004). Spanish administrations have also set road safety goals as one of their main policies (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2004; DGT, 2005a). New key strategies include a number of educational, structural, passive safety, and deterrence and enforcement actions. Changes at legal level include the coming into force of a road safety law and the approval of new penal legislation for offenders. Some of the measures have attracted media attention and aroused public controversy, especially use of speed cameras, the increase in random breath testing, and the penalty point driver license system launched in 2005.

Citizen participation has been extensively recommended to enhance the effectiveness of road safety policies and actions by linking them to population needs (Road Safety Management, 2006; Smith, 2003; Vermaak, 1998; Ministry of Transport, 2004; Towner and Dowsell, 2002) especially when new laws are being developed (Girasek et al., 2002). When not consulted, citizens' opposition to new enforcement measures may lead politicians and planners to concentrate more on

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minimising public reactions than on reducing injuries (Johnston, 2004).

In Spain, scientific publications on public perceptions about traffic safety features are scarce. There are some studies on social attitudes relying on population surveys which provide knowledge for prevention and control strategies (DGT, 2005b) (Sanchez Martin, 2005). The most recent study derives from the European SARTRE 3 survey, which documents attitudes, opinions and behaviours of drivers in 23 European countries. The EU has harmonised certain road safety legislation and measures; the survey only explores the attitudes to such measures and other factors given priority on this continent: alcohol, speed, and seat-belt usage. Among the results referring to young people is the noteworthy finding that young males, both in Spain and in Europe in general, adopt a more dangerous style of driving than the rest. Regarding the alcohol factor in traffic crashes, younger males lend it less importance than the rest. Compared to Northern Europe, among drivers in Southern or Mediterranean countries there is a higher proportion of frequent drinkers, but there is also a notably higher proportion of teetotalers. Over half the youngest drivers, aged 18–39 years, declare that at times they drive under the influence of alcohol. With respect to opinions on preventive measures, young people were less in favour of the adoption of a penalty point system than the other age groups, just prior to its introduction. Most Spanish drivers are in favour of requiring a blood-alcohol level of zero for new drivers, in favour of alcohol-related offences being sanctioned more severely, and consider as positive the use of devices to prevent a driver who is over the legal limit from driving a car. However, in-depth understanding of citizens' views on these and other factors related with traffic injuries is still lacking.

Qualitative methodologies provide insight into attitudes, beliefs and perceptions of individuals and populations (Krueger, 1991). Of the various qualitative techniques, focus groups have an open nature which allows unknown personal and group opinions to emerge. Focus groups have been successfully used in traffic injuries studies (Agran et al., 2004; Simpson et al., 2003; Butchart et al., 2000; Zhang et al., 2006; Blantari et al., 2005).

Young people's extra risk for crash involvement is related to inexperience and characteristics associated with youthful age (McKnight and McKnight, 2003; Jiménez-Moleón et al., 2004; Groeger, 2006). A variety of measures have been proposed by experts and reviews: communication campaigns, laws and enforcement, incentives for good drivers, graduate licensing, new types of driver education and community programs (Williams, 2006; Berg, 2006). Notwithstanding, few qualitative studies have explored the views of adolescents and young adults on such measures (Nyggaard et al., 2003) and none in Spain.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate young people's perceptions about the evolution, magnitude, causes and determinants of traffic crashes, to describe their opinions about road safety regulations, and to explore their own suggestions for intervention proposals. This knowledge may help public administrations to take into account the expectations, perceptions and needs of the population when designing and implementing policies, messages and actions.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

Two qualitative techniques were used: key informant interviews and focus groups. Forty-three local key informants were interviewed, with the intention of gaining preliminary approximation to the study goals. They were identified through reports and the snowball technique within the condition that they be highly knowledgeable of the objective and diverse contexts of the study. Therefore, health care providers, policemen, waiters, taxi drivers, heads of associations related to traffic injuries and traffic injuries victims, youth counsellors, social workers, emergency room doctors, epidemiologists, and psychologists were approached to provide epidemiological, health-related, and social information on traffic injuries among young people, as well as characteristics of their leisure time activities. This basic information helped the investigators to focus the discussion areas, elaborate a guide for the groups, define the sample and sampling methods, and develop criteria to segment the population.

These views, together with the findings of a survey on the situation and opinions of young people in Spain (Injuve, 2004), led the research team to believe that young people would perceive the realities of traffic safety, risks, prevention, and enforcement differently depending on their age, gender and way of spending their leisure time. Hence, mixed subgroups were set up with the intention of capturing discourses which were as representative as possible about the reality of urban and metropolitan young people. Groups were segmented according to age (15–18 and 19–35), because in Spain the moped licensing age is 16, car licensing age is 18, low alcohol graduation beverages may legally be purchased at 16, alcohol consumption is allowed at 18 and the average age of emancipation is one of the highest in Europe (Injuve, 2004), and therefore that people in their thirties can be considered socially young. Gender was also a segmentation variable (Williams, 2006; Berg, 2006). For the 19–35 age group, and taking suggestions of the coordinators of the Barcelona Youth Plan into account, we classified the leisure time patterns into two broad groups, dichotomising leisure groups as 'techno/fashion' and 'alternative' as described below. It was hypothesized that attitudes and behaviours of these groups would differ (Chliaoutakis et al., 1999). As a result, 12 groups were formed.

2.2. Recruitment and participants

Several methods were used to locate the participants. Research staff handed out fliers and posters in clubs, concerts, musical bars, raves, demonstrations, university campus, streets and public transport facilities. They also advertised via email, internet chats from civic centres, cultural organisations, music websites, and university campus notice boards. Participation was open during the autumn of 2004. A structured telephone interview on age, gender, leisure patterns (music, neighbourhood where they socialised), occupation, car or motorbike driving led to the selection of 136 participants and their distribution into the

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