

PACTS Research Briefing

REDUCING THE BAC LIMIT TO 50mg – WHAT CAN WE EXPECT TO GAIN?

A fresh look at drink-drive deaths and injuries

Professor Richard E Allsop
Centre for Transport Studies
University College London

The purpose of the legal limit on drivers' blood alcohol content (BAC) is to reduce death and injury on the roads.

After 40 years or more of continual public information, most of us know by now that the best advice is never to drive after drinking, almost every driver's BAC should be zero, and absolutely every driver's should be below 20mg/100ml.

But we don't live in an ideal world, and up to now, against a background of advice not to drive at all after drinking, we have confined legal sanctions in Britain to driving with BACs higher than 80.

In asking what we could expect to gain by lowering this limit to 50, it helps to think of drivers in three groups.

The first group

are those who never drive with a BAC over 50 anyway, the vast majority of whom never drive with a BAC anywhere near 50. At the time of the last extensive surveys in Britain, this was about 97 per cent of those driving on weekend evenings and nights – so presumably an even higher percentage at other times.

These are those who have already got the message "don't drink and drive". The only slight effect on this group of lowering the limit to 50 would be to reduce the BACs of those who are somewhere near 50 and decide to cut down a bit. This will save a few lives but I've left these out of my calculation.

The second group

are those who already drive with BACs well over the limit of 80 – fewer than 1 per cent of those driving even on weekend evenings and nights.

These account for well over 400 of the 550 drink-drive deaths each year – and since they seem to be beyond the influence of the 80mg limit, they probably won't be affected much if at all by lowering it to 50. The Minister is right to address this major part of the drink-driving problem through enforcement and penalties – in particular in

this Bill by enabling the police to enforce more effectively through evidential breathtesting at the roadside. So any lives that may be saved by reduced drinking among those already well over the limit are also left out of my calculation.

The third group,

those to whom the level of the limit is most relevant, are those already driving at around the limit. In common with the government's consultation paper of 1998, I've taken these to be those with BACs between 50 and 110mg (*ie* 30mg either side of the limit). In the last surveys they were about 2 per cent of those driving on weekend evenings and nights, and in my estimation they account for about 130 deaths per year, about half of them counted among the 550 drink drive deaths.

For those already keeping within the 80mg limit but only by a margin of up to 30mg, I've assumed no more than that they will reduce their drinking by just enough to keep within a 50mg limit. And for those currently exceeding the 80 limit by up to 30, I've assumed that they will exceed a 50 limit by the same margin as they now exceed 80. And I've assumed that the current distribution of BACs in drivers involved in fatal collisions is the same as the distribution of BACs in drivers who are killed.

With these assumptions, I've used the best estimate we have (Maycock TRL Report 232 1997) of the way the risk of involvement in a fatal collision increases with the BAC – *ie* reaching 5 times the level without alcohol at a BAC of 50mg and 34 times the level without alcohol at a BAC of 110mg. It then follows that about 65 lives per year would be saved by reducing the limit to 50mg. Similarly, about 230 people per year would be saved from serious injury.

When you're thinking about keeping burglars out of your home, you don't say "I won't bother to fit locks to the windows, because they'll do nothing to prevent burglars coming in through the doors" – you fit locks both to the doors and to the windows.

So the fact that reducing the limit from 80 to 50 may well do little to save the 400 and more lives lost each year from driving way over the 80 limit is no reason for not acting to save around 65 of the 130 or so other lives that are lost each year from driving at around the limit of 80 – acting to save those lives by reducing the limit to 50.