

PACTS' response to *Monitoring drink driving: A statistical consultation on the Department for Transport's drink drive statistics*

Background

Major progress has been made in reducing drink drive casualties over the past decades. In 2012 drink drive deaths and serious injuries in Great Britain were both around 85% lower than in 1979. However drink driving remains a major road safety issue. The final estimate for 2012 drink drive deaths was 230 deaths – around 13% of all road deaths.

PACTS believes that accurate and timely information is required on the scale of drink driving casualties and trends. PACTS therefore welcomes the Department's consultation¹ on the drink drive statistics.

The consultation paper compares the provisional and final drink drive statistics over the past decade. It shows a mixed picture:

- The difference between provisional and final is not always very large (if any): of the 9 years shown, only 2007, 2008 and 2011 show large differences.
- In some years the final figure has been *higher* than provisional. However, in 4 out of 5 recent years the provisional figure has been higher than the final which suggests systematic overestimation of the provisional figures.
- There is a problem in that the direction of change suggested by the provisional figure when compared to the previous year's final figure has been wrong in some years (2004, 2008 and 2011). The provisional figure can therefore mislead as to the trend and whether things are improving or not.
- As the number of drink driving casualties reduces, the likelihood of significant variation between the provisional and final statistics increases.

PACTS accepts that there are some problems with the current reporting arrangements and that improvements are desirable. It is inevitable that provisional statistics will often require adjustment but it is unhelpful if the provisional statistics give an incorrect indication of the direction of change.

¹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335412/monitoring-drink-driving-statistical-consultation.pdf

C1 What use do you make of the provisional and final drink driving estimates at present?

PACTS uses (or might use) the drink driving statistics in a number of ways including:

- to monitor trends in casualty reduction;
- to assess the performance of the authorities in tackling drink driving;
- to inform campaign priorities;
- in press statements, newsletters and other media, e.g. Twitter;
- in Parliamentary briefings or suggested PQs; and
- in research reports.

C.2 Which, if any, of the proposed options below do you think is the best future form for the provisional estimates and why?

Option 0. Retain provisional statistics with their current form and timing

Option 1. Stop publishing provisional statistics entirely

Option 2. Delay provisional statistics to later in the year to allow a larger, more representative sample to be gathered

Option 3. Adjust the estimates to account for the bias

Option 4. Produce the estimate as a range, rather than a single "best" estimate

The options are not mutually exclusive – for example, option 2 (delaying to later in the year) could be combined with 3 or 4.

PACTS favours a combination of Option 2, 3 and 4 but with caveats as follows:

Option 0: PACTS rejects this option. PACTS believes improvements can and should be made. The provisional statistics can give an incorrect indication of the direction of change. The provisional figure for drink drive deaths in 2012 (published August 2013) was 290 and soon revised to 280 (September 2013). However, the final statistic (published August 2014) was 230.² The provisional figure was therefore 60 deaths (26%) higher than the final figure and suggested an increase in drink driving casualties.

Option 1: PACTS rejects this option. PACTS believes that there is a need to monitor trends in a timely way and to provide feedback to the police, THINK! campaigns and other road safety practitioners on the efficacy of drink drive interventions. To delay publication until 18 months after the year end would break the link between interventions and results and render the statistics largely academic.

² [Reported road casualties in Great Britain, final estimates involving illegal alcohol levels: 2012](#)

Option 2: PACTS rejects any significant delay in publishing provisional statistics for the reasons stated above. However, PACTS would accept a slight delay so that the provisional statistics are published in September in RRCGB. This would not significantly increase accuracy but it would avoid the confusion that can arise from publication of two differing sets of provisional statistics (in August and then September).

Option 3: PACTS is prepared to accept this option if a more reliable adjustment method can be found, particularly if it helps to reduce the likelihood of the provisional figure suggesting the wrong direction of change.

The consultation document acknowledges that often the adjustment method would not help:

In 2008 and 2011, the adjusted methodology would have reduced the size of revision by a few percentage points, but still “under-adjusts” relative to the actual revision. In other years, the methodology “over-adjusts” and would have made the revision worse, albeit in the opposite direction. (para 3.26)

We feel this option needs further work and should not be introduced in 2015. Adjustment factors without a clear evidence base can confuse and invite accusations of “fiddle factors” and “cooking the books”.

Option 4: PACTS favours the option of publishing a range PROVIDED that a single central or best estimate is also published. A range is not easy for the public or media to use and there would be a temptation to pick the figure which suited the story. The press would probably adopt the highest (most dramatic) figure which might make the provisional statistics even more misleading. The DfT needs to be prepared to state its best estimate (however it arrives at it), even if this fails a strict test of statistical purity.

C.3 If option 2 is your preferred option, when in the year do you think the provisional estimates should be published?

As stated above in C2, PACTS would accept a slight delay to September in order to avoid two sets of provisional figures. However, this would not significantly improve accuracy and may be unhelpful to those agencies planning Christmas drink drive campaigns. An alternative would be to repeat the August figures in RRCGB and not publish an amended *provisional* figure at this point.

We note the suggestion by the Institute for Alcohol Studies to publish drink drive casualty estimates at 6, 12 and 18 months after the end of each year, i.e. an additional provisional figure at 12 months. We believe this has merit.

C.4 If option 3 is your preferred option, do you have any suggestions for an improved adjustment methodology?

In general terms PACTS favours an adjustment methodology that helps ensure that the direction of change, if any, is correct in the provisional statistics. However, PACTS does not have specific suggestions to improve the adjustment methodology. However, please see C7.

C.5 If option 4 is your preferred option, do you have any other suggestions on how to construct a sensible range?

No.

C.6 Do you have any views on hybrid options, combining aspects of options 2, 3 or 4

These are set out above.

C.7 Do you have any other suggestions on improved methodologies for the provisional estimates?

The reasons for the delays in obtaining the remaining data are not explained in detail in the consultation document. PACTS would support more efforts going towards obtaining the results sooner – presumably this might include more cooperation by coroners, faster processing of the toxicology results, STATS19 data matching and analysis. Some of this would presumably require support from other Government departments.

C.8 Do you have any other comments or feedback?

PACTS welcomes the greater use of graphics, video and other presentation methods in recent DfT statistical publications. These can make the road casualty and transport statistics more interesting, understandable and accessible.

PACTS would like more context and explanation of the drink drive figures, in the same document or at least summarised and referenced. For example, interventions undertaken (numbers of drivers breathalysed, failure rates, drink drive campaigns) and other factors likely to have a bearing on the statistics (traffic levels, demographics, alcohol prices and consumption). PACTS realises that it is not possible to be precise about attribution (why or by how much) but some pointers would be useful.

PACTS understands that the police now report to the Home Office the number of drivers who register 50-80mg (or breath equivalent) in breath tests. It would be helpful if these data were also published.

Ends
September 2014