

Risky Behavior and the Attitudes Towards the Police Safety Operations in the Czech Republic

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Abstract. This study maps attitudes of drivers towards police actions and operations in the Czech Republic. Data was gathered through a representative survey, which involved 1482 persons aged 18 years and older. The survey covered three types of topics. (1) Orientation in the system of sanctions and perceiving of punishments for traffic offences. (2) Experiences with traffic police. (3) An efficiency of the police operations and actions. The result shows slight and time limited influence of police actions on drivers' behavior. Data also show insufficient deterrence and ignorance of system among drivers.

Keywords: Traffic safety · Risk behavior · Police action efficiency · Attitudes towards police

1 Introduction

In the Czech Republic, we have frequent and long-term risky behavior on the roads in comparison with other EU countries. This behavior is connected with high road accident rate and mortality rate. This is usually mentioned together with two reasons. (1) Insufficient system of graduate drive licensing and (2) minimum number of measures aimed at a small group of the most risky drivers. Less often we can find research which deal with insufficient deterrence as possible source of risk behavior.

It is well known that lack of feedback from system, along with a perceived improvement in driving skills during the first years of driving causes change in the perception of the consequences of risky behavior [1], overestimation of own driving skills [2], and a negative impact on risk perception [3]. The significance of these factors is modified by age, experience and education that have an impact on personality traits and attitudes to violations of traffic rules [4]. This results in higher participation of young drivers in traffic accidents, since they tend to behave more risky when driving, especially in the context of speeding [5], and more frequent abuse among men [6, 7].

Without appropriate deterrence, drivers tend to leave safe behavior learned in driving schools as the motivation for keeping rules falls with time. Part of the drivers would not follow the rules without threat of detection and penalties or would show much less respect towards the rules. That is why deterrence is important part of traffic safety and should be enhanced as much as possible. By deterrence is meant police surveillance, detection and prosecution of offenders.

Main aim of the deterrence is motivation of road users to comply with the rules while it should also fulfill a preventive function. It is one of the essential components of traffic safety, since it has an immediate effect on the number of accidents and their consequences (depending on its intensity and quality). It is primarily focused on increasing the safety of traffic participants through the threat of detection and punishment (general level), and through penalties for those who were caught and convicted (specific level). Its effectiveness depends on the perception of sanctions in the driver population. Thus, the attitudes towards the police safety operations influence driver behavior considerably and have big potential impact on risky or safe behavior.

Whereby the most important seems to be certainty of punishment [8], while increasing the actual hardness of the punishment brings only a small reduction in the risk behavior of individuals [9], and little change in the behavior of the population [10, 11]. Severity of punishment is an effective factor in the case when the perceived certainty of being caught and punished is high [11, 12]. But for example in group of repeated offenders is perception of both very low (hence have harsh penalties for this group of little influence). In the case of the swiftness of punishment, there is no accordance among researchers but it can be regarded as a less important factor than the certainty of detection [13, 14]. Swiftness of punishment was considered as an important factor in the past, since the times of Criminology book "On Crimes and Punishments" by Cesare Beccaria from the 18th century to the late 20th century. In the context of contemporary research, however, it shows that this is characteristic rather for animals, not for humans, who are able to combine punishment with the offence even after a long time.

Overall, it can be stated, that if certainty of punishment is high, punishment comes quickly and is reasonably hard then there is a measurable reduction in risk behavior. Reduction is on both, specific (in particular man) and general (the whole population) levels. Discourse of harsh sanctions, which is regularly emerging within the social or political debate, has no support in traffic psychological or criminological literature. In addition, for hard sanctions such as imprisonment, we can follow a series of accompanying negative phenomena. For example, it has negative effect on future opportunities in terms of education and employability; on immediate vicinity of the offender; relationships and family background and reputation (stigma of conviction). Also, administrative burden and costs of these harsh penalties for traffic offences disproportionately burden the judicial system [15].

2 Aim and Methods of the Study

As the deterrence is key factor for reducing risky behavior and its efficiency depends on perceiving in general population, aim of this research was to map attitudes towards the police safety operations in the Czech Republic, which are a main tool of deterrence.

A survey was used as a method of data gathering. The aim of the survey was to conduct a statistical investigation mapping an attitudes and experience of the target population with the traffic police operations and actions. The survey was conducted by statistical agency, which interviewed respondents aged 18 years and older, in such a way as to ensure the representativeness of the sample in relation to the population of the

Czech population - in terms of socio-demographic profile of respondents. Basic selection of the sample was based on quota sampling, reflecting relevant socio-demographic characteristics of respondents older than 18 years. This means age distribution, proportional representation according to the region of residence, size of inhabited municipalities, education, and gender. The research involved a total of 1482 persons, who in the past six months did not participate in market research and public opinion research.

In the survey, apart the sociodemographic, drivers were asked on three clusters of questions. (1) How much are they oriented in the system of sanctions and perceiving of punishments for traffic offences; (2) What experiences do they have with traffic police; 3) How they evaluate efficiency of the police operations and actions.

3 Sample

While women accounted for 51.5% of the total respondents ($N = 763$) in the case of men, it was 48.5% ($N = 719$). From this perspective, the sample fairly accurately reflects the gender structure of the population - according to the current data of the Czech Statistical Office (CSO), women account for approximately 51% of the population [16].

Regarding the highest level of education, 16.5% ($N = 244$) of respondents reached basic (including unfinished) level of education, 37.1% ($N = 550$) completed secondary education, 34% ($N = 504$) high school education and finally, 12.4% ($N = 184$) of respondents achieved a university degree. If we compare these data with the Czech population [16], once again we can say relatively accurate reflection - at least within the categories of basic (population 17.6%) and higher (12.5% of the population) level of education. The share of respondents with completed secondary level of education is slightly different from the population - in the case of secondary education there were 33% and 27.1% of the population.

Regarding the age of the respondents, the average age in the sample corresponded to the age of 46.6 years ($SD = 16.6$). This is a value higher than the national average, i.e. 41.9 years (CSO, 2016), which is in line with the intention of research as it was oriented on adult population. The oldest person was 89 years, the youngest respondent 18 years.

Regarding the frequency of driving during the last year, almost a third (27.7%; $N = 411$) of the respondents drive every day and only slightly fewer respondents drive at least several times a month (26.5%; 392 persons). About a third of respondents in the last year or did not drive the car. There were 71 (4.8%) professional drivers.

4 Results

In terms of cluster 1 the vast majority of respondents admitted very small (if any) orientation in the current system of penalties for traffic offenses (including the number of demerit points and the amount of the fine). Only about 6% drivers has a good knowledge of the system of penalties (according to self-assessment), while 19% openly declared knowing nothing of the system and 42% of drivers declared unfamiliarity with the system.

This ignorance is reinforced by discrepancy between agreeing with the relatively severe penalties for offences and own behavior, which is characterized by committing those offences. Really interesting is, that there was no difference in assessing the severity (of punishment) between group who commit those specific offences and group who do not. And also that majority of respondents would welcome more police controls and actions.

As for experience with traffic police, 54% of drivers were stopped by police patrols during last 12 months. When considering overall experience with patrols and officers, only 9% of drivers had negative feelings from the encounter(s). Neither age nor gender were significant in this cluster. Answers were consistent and there were no differences in terms of any measured parameter of the sample.

From answers from cluster 3, it is clear, that police actions and operations have at least some impact on behavior. As much as 53% of drivers declared that they more follow the rules when there are any police actions in their region. Despite this change in behavior, only 3% of drivers use mobile applications, which are able to monitor police patrols and actions in order to avoid possible encounter.

The most important part of the third cluster was the evaluation of police actions and operations. When considering impact of police actions and operations on other drivers, respondents generally predicted influence on 50% of the driving population. Specific influence was rated in a way that for all surveyed categories was count share of sample that expects impact on at least half of driver population. As the most efficient were seen actions towards drink driving when 70% of respondents think, that these actions will positively influence at least 50% of drivers in short term (up to one week after noticing the action). On the opposite side there were actions focused on drug driving (43% of respondents assume positive impact on at least 50% of drivers) and prevention (40% of respondents assume positive impact on 50% of drivers).

When the sociodemographic variables are taken into account it can be seen that only education makes some differences. There were two significant positive relationships. Firstly, there is relationship between education and using hands-free instead of holding cell phone in hands (Kendall Tau-c (1079) = 0.15; $p < 0.001$). And secondly, between education and speeding up to 10 km per hour (Kendall Tau-c (1079) = 0.08; $p < 0.05$).

5 Discussion

As results shows, it is clear that police actions and operations have some impact on individuals, and up to the extent to which we can rely on assessing the others, also on driving population. Results also show, that people are not able to assess impact or influence precisely. For example, they are not able to distinguish among specific police actions and tend to evaluate them in same way. Based on little differences in scores for each type of action it could be said, that when evaluating actions, they evaluate deterrence in general. However, although the efficiency cannot be rated for each action, it is possible to track the perceived efficiency generally what brings light on deterrence effect in the Czech Republic. When taking this general efficiency in concrete numbers, the effect does not seem to be high. Half of the drivers admit behavior change for up to one

week after noticing action and suppose in average influence of action on half of the population. But when we take into account acceptance of severe punishments even for those offence which they commit and very poor knowledge of sanction system it can be stated that drivers do not fear of being caught or being punished.

This can be supported by fact that drivers perceive the system of punishments as a fair as there is no difference in evaluation between those who commit those offences and those who do not. Also direct work of the police is perceived as polite when more than 90% drivers did not notice any problems. With this numbers, it is not surprising that majority of drivers demands more police patrols on the roads. This leads again to assumption that drivers do not perceive the threat of detection and punishment as high or real.

In addition, there is one more indication for above-mentioned statement. Number of controlled drivers in the sample was 54%. This is extremely high within condition in the Czech Republic. According to police statistic [17], in 2015 there were 1664 police actions and operations in whole country and police checked altogether nearly 600 thousands drivers that year. In the Czech Republic, there is 10 million of inhabitants, 6.5 million have driving license and 5 million are active drivers. That leads to statistical probability of control approximately once per ten years. This means two things. Firstly, our sample does not match these statistical probabilities, and secondly even when controlled so often, they still do not fear of detection and punishment.

6 Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on our research we can evaluate the strength of deterrence in the Czech Republic as rather low. Even when drivers from the sample encounter police controls frequently they do not feel need to know the system and punishment for breaking traffic rules, and what is more, wish more police patrols on the roads. This assumption should be nevertheless confirmed by further research focused directly on perceiving fear or probability of punishment from the authorities.

The lack of knowledge of sanction system is probably caused by the fact that the Czech Republic does not have implemented any measure from graduated driver licensing. There is no accompanied driving, no prolonged test period for novice drivers, no driver improvement courses and all learner drivers obtain full license after few weeks in driving school. What is more, in driving schools there is possibility to have “individual plan” what means that learner drivers do only test rides and after 28 “school” hours (45 min) of test driving can undergo final exam. This is one of the shortest period of learning in EU countries and thus absolutely insufficient for safety behavior of novice drivers. Therefore, it is crucial to extend length of learning and cancel the possibility of individual plan as learner drivers in this type of learning only memorize the test questions and correct answers without insight into their meaning and importance. It is also necessary to include discussion about risk behavior and sanctions, which follow it, as awareness of consequences is important factor for preventing traffic offences. All these recommendations are periodically offered to Czech ministry of transport and highlighted in

various strategic documents (e.g. in National road safety strategy) but there is no political will for implementation so far.

Driving schools methods and driver licensing system are not the only ones that should be changed. This research has possible implication also for work of the traffic police. Results of our study show that drivers see no or little differences among police actions and thus have no clear idea of what is police doing (vast majority of respondents were not able to name any preventive police action). This strongly influences subjective probability of being caught for committing offences (in negative way) and consequently causes more risky behavior on the roads. Thus it is necessary for police to communicate better with public, explain what is being done for traffic safety and that there is plenty of various actions that are targeting unsafe behavior. Higher awareness of police work will enhance deterrence effect and affect drivers' subjective feeling of likelihood of detection of inappropriate behavior.

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