

Drunk driving women treated differently than men

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A study by Victoria University of Wellington's Health Services Research Centre explores attitudes and behaviours surrounding women and drink-driving, and the extent to which they have changed over the past decade.

Led by senior researchers Dr Jenny Neale and Dr Gregory Martin from the School of Government, the research combined Dr Martin's expertise in alcohol and drugs with Dr Neale's interest in gender analysis—a lens which Dr Neale says has seldom been applied to drink-[driving](#).

"There's been a lot of media publicity in recent years about [women](#) drinking. Although there has been a lot of research and campaigns around drink-driving, in general the focus is on [young men](#) and the risk they pose to themselves and others," says Dr Neale.

The Victoria University research assessed various sources of data on drink-driving and found that though the demographic of young men featured most prominently in the statistics, women were still participating in that behaviour—with an increasing proportion of [older women](#) driving under the influence.

The proportion of young men driving while intoxicated decreased from 41 percent in 2001 to 33 percent in 2012, whereas the proportion of young women remained relatively stable dropping from 22 to 20 percent in the same period. The number of women aged 65 and over who were driving while intoxicated doubled from 4 to 8 percent.

Dr Neale puts the increase in the older age bracket down to the first of the baby-boomers reaching that demographic and the cohort as a whole having a greater number of women with driving experience than was previously the case for over-65s.

A review of New Zealand's media coverage of incidents of drink-driving over the past decade found an increase in the number of news stories about mothers caught driving over the breath-alcohol limit with children in the car. However, Dr Neale says, incidents involving women were often sensationalised and the statistics for drink-driving in the same period did not match perceptions created by the media.

"Women tend to get a headline signifier when offences are reported in the media, where they are framed as 'mother on way to school', or 'drunk grandmother'. It creates this moral outrage, because it goes against the way in which women are expected to behave.

"There is no specific offence for driving over the limit with children in the car, nor for being on the way to pick them up. Of course, this is not acceptable behaviour but somehow it is seen as worse for women than men in comparable situations."

Despite the way media has been portraying women drink-drivers, Dr Neale says there has not been any systematic attempt to address the behaviour, with advertising campaigns continuing to largely be targeted at young men.

"Some of the older women we interviewed felt that those campaigns did not resonate with them at any way at all."

Dr Martin says women across all age groups who took part in the study noted that drinking in [social situations](#) brings challenges.

"Both the older and younger women interviewed noted that if you were with a group of people it was more difficult to monitor what you're drinking. They talked about how, in social situations, your glass is often being continuously filled, making it hard to moderate how much they were drinking."

Dr Martin says the research shows there is a lot more awareness of the dangers of drinking and driving. He believes messages should continue to be aimed at those most at risk of the behaviour "but every now and then there need to be messages targeting [younger women](#) in particular".

"You can't assume that a campaign is actually going to hit equally across genders, and that's always worth thinking about."

More information: The complete report is available online: [www.victoria.ac.nz/sog/research ... ng-version-Final.pdf](http://www.victoria.ac.nz/sog/research/2014-09-drunk-women-differently-men.html)

Provided by Victoria University

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