

Baby boomers are increasingly more likely to risk drink-driving than millennials

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Credit: shutterstock

"Baby boomers," all now over the age of 50, have shown the [fastest rise in rates of alcohol and drug misuse](#) over the past 15 years – and this is playing out on Britain's roads.

At first glance, the latest data on reported [accidents and casualties on public roads](#) in England and Wales is little more than a general update. There are the standard statistics on drink drive accidents and casualties using roadside breath testing. There is also data on [blood alcohol levels](#) for accidents involving deaths from drink driving. In 2017, there were just under 171,000 casualties from reported road traffic accidents. This was 6% lower than in 2016 – making it [the lowest level on record](#).

But more revealing data comes from the [British Crime Survey](#). [The Survey](#) looked at self-reported driving by people who think that they have been over the legal alcohol limit at least once in the last 12 months. Between 2010 and 2018, there was a reduction of nearly 50% in the proportion of people aged 16 to 19 who took this risk. For people aged 50, it fell by only 11%.

The same survey also provided data on the proportion of people reporting driving under the

influence of drugs over the previous 12 months – which paints a very different picture. Although there was a reduction of 61% for 16- to 19 year-olds over the past ten years, the reduction for [baby boomers](#) was a staggering 98%.

A likely explanation for the comparatively larger reductions in people willing to take the risk of drug driving compared with drink driving may be a change in the law over the past four years. Until 2015, there were no defined limits for individual controlled drugs when bringing charges against someone suspected of drug driving. This changed in 2015 through the introduction of [Section 5A of the Road Traffic Act](#). This set an upper limit for the level of specific controlled drugs in a driver's blood.

A report assessing the [impact of this change in law enforcement](#) found evidence of an improvement in awareness of the change in law enforcement among road users across all age groups. This appears to have been an even bigger deterrent to drug driving in older people.

Cultural norms

So why then are older drivers more prepared to risk drink driving than drug driving? Part of this may be the influence of cultural norms, such as being exposed to high levels of advertising during their early years, but also to the increased affordability of alcohol.

An upper legal limit of 80 milligrammes of alcohol per 100ml (also referred to as 0.08%) of blood was adopted across Europe over 50 years ago. Unlike the rest of Europe and Scotland, the rest of the UK [has not changed this legal level](#). In Scotland, for example it is now 0.05%

In 2013, the National Transportation Safety Board in the US reduced the legal limit for blood alcohol [from 0.08% to 0.05%](#). This resulted in an 11% decline in fatal alcohol-related crashes.

Slow reactions

[Even without drinking alcohol](#), older people have slower reaction times and are less able to maintain a constant distance behind another car during driving simulation compared to younger people.

Older people are also more likely to experience the harmful effects of alcohol after drinking the [same quantity of alcohol as younger people](#). This is because of a reduced ability to remove alcohol from the bloodstream, as well as a higher likelihood of taking prescribed medication and having accompanying long-term health problems.

So should there be a lower legal blood alcohol level? Given that baby boomers are at increasingly higher risk of alcohol misuse and are more likely to take the risk of drink driving compared with drug driving, it may be the only direction of travel. After all, [alcohol](#) is a [drug](#). And the sooner it's treated like one, the better.

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