

Report 38

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Car drivers in Switzerland and Europe: Longitudinal and cross-sectional comparisons of opinions and attitudes

Summary

SARTRE 2 is an international survey which – following the SARTE 1 Study of 1991 – was carried out for a second time in 1996. A total of 19 countries took part, 13 of which were members of the European Union, five from the former East European bloc, and Switzerland.

The purpose of the study was

- to record opinions, attitudes and behaviour of car drivers throughout Europe and to compare them with those of Swiss drivers
- to analyze trends relating to road safety by means of a longitudinal-sectional comparison
- to carry out a comparison of Switzerland's three linguistic regions
- to create statistical models of risky behaviour (driving under the influence of alcohol, driving without wearing a seat belt and driving too fast) that enable evidence of possible variables affecting this behaviour to be obtained (logit models)

Based on the knowledge gained, appropriate road safety measures that are likely to be accepted by drivers can then be developed.

For the purpose of the comparison between Switzerland and the other European countries the latter were divided into Western Europe and Eastern Europe. Providing a detailed representation by country was resisted because this already forms part of the report by the SARTRE study group (SARTRE, 1998).

General opinions and attitudes

The problems that concern the Swiss most are unemployment and environmental pollution. Road accidents and crime are accorded roughly the same importance, occupying fourth position.

The main road safety problems are felt to be driving under the influence of alcohol and driving (too) fast. On the other hand, vehicle-related and road-related accident causes are not considered to be very important. In the French-speaking part of Switzerland the situation is different to the extent that interviewees there felt that vehicle-related accident causes (such as worn tyres, poor brakes, faulty steering and defective vehicle lights) were thought to be much more significant than was the case in other parts of the country. Despite this, more frequent vehicle controls are not wished for in French-speaking Switzerland. Poor road conditions were mentioned as a cause of accidents more frequently in all parts of the country in 1996 than in 1991 – but this cause is still fairly low on the list.

The most important measures for bringing about greater road safety were considered to be improved driving instruction and better roads. Improvement in road quality was the only corrective measure that was mentioned more often in the second survey than in the first. It may be that the cost-saving efforts of the federal, cantonal and local governments have left their mark on Switzerland's roads.

In the French- and Italian-speaking parts of Switzerland there is more support for technical measures aimed at improving road safety than there is in the German-speaking part of the country. In all three linguistic regions a distance control system is considered to be the most useful of these.

Making a contribution to environmental protection **and to road safety** by using public transport and reducing one's own driving is widely supported. The average annual car mileage in Switzerland is already lower than in the other European countries. However, car mileage in the French-speaking part

of Switzerland is considerably greater than in German-speaking and southern Switzerland (18,600 vs. 12,900 and 13,500, respectively).

Most government support is requested for non-motorized traffic (cyclists and pedestrians) as well as for public transport. Motorized traffic, on the other hand, is not seen as needing the same degree of promotion. To a certain extent, this statement contradicts the aforementioned findings with regard to improving road quality in order to increase road safety.

General road behaviour

A manifest willingness to infringe the road traffic regulations is not especially pronounced in Switzerland. An exception would seem to be the non-observance of the right of way of pedestrians on zebra crossings. This offence is committed much more frequently in Switzerland than in the rest of Europe, with German-Swiss drivers, especially, being guilty. However, this contradicts observations at pedestrian crossings made by **cap** (EWERT, 1997). This study found no differences between German-Swiss and French-Swiss drivers. The fact that there has been an increase in all forms of behavioural delinquency between 1991 and 1996 represents another road safety problem. This points to a certain decay in standards of behaviour on the roads.

Driving under the influence of alcohol

In Switzerland drivers tend to consume alcohol rather more sparingly and infrequently than drivers in the rest of Europe. In Italian-speaking Switzerland (the canton of Ticino) however, smaller amounts are drunk more often and in German-speaking Switzerland greater quantities less frequently. In French-speaking Switzerland the quantities consumed are comparable to those in German-speaking Switzerland and the frequency is comparable to that in Ticino – the consumption of alcohol is thus greatest here. Consistent with this is the fact that, compared with German-speaking Switzerland, alcohol is increasingly viewed as a road safety problem in both French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino.

In comparison with 1991 more permissive attitudes with respect to the consumption of alcohol had become more common by 1996. The subjectively assessed danger of drinking a bottle of wine decreased significantly between 1991 and 1996; at the same time the influence of alcohol as a cause of accidents was considered to be much less significant.

Roughly 25 per cent of Swiss say that they drive at least once a week after having drunk a small amount of alcohol; in French-speaking Switzerland the proportion is 30 per cent and in Ticino only slightly less. Eight per cent of all Swiss drive even if they think they have drunk more than the legal limit; in French-speaking Switzerland more than 11 per cent of drivers admit to behaving in this way – a very worrying figure.

In this survey only roughly one third of the respondents were in favour of reducing the alcohol limit. However, other **cap** surveys (1998) found approval ratings of up to 70 per cent. There was a very positive attitude towards imposing an alcohol-consumption ban on young drivers. Even in the youngest age group (under 25s), there was a clear majority in favour of such a measure. In view of the considerable danger that driving under the influence of alcohol represents for young drivers, this seems to be a measure that would be effective and also enjoy widespread popular acceptance.

The strategies and possibilities for checking drink-driving are limited. Consequently the perceived frequency of breath tests is also low: 42 per cent of the Swiss asked did not reckon with ever being tested for alcohol consumption. In an international comparison this is a very low value, and is possibly explained by the fact that in Switzerland the police are required to have a reasonable suspicion before they are allowed to administer a breath test.

Nevertheless a relatively large percentage of the interviewees (3.6 per cent) had been fined for drink-driving in the previous three years. This result can be interpreted as showing that the actual testing

frequency compares quite well internationally, but that the subjective testing probability, on which the general preventive effect is of course based, is not high enough. Possibly the frequency of breath testing and the success of it should be publicized to a greater extent in the media.

The logit models relating to driving under the influence of alcohol indicate that the frequency of alcohol consumption and the amounts consumed are important determinants for driving under the influence of alcohol. On the other hand, the general preventive effect of subjectively frequent police checks could not be verified.

Wearing a seat belt

The equipment of vehicles with seat belts is very good in Switzerland. Some 94 per cent of cars are fitted with seat belts on front **and** rear seats. In the 1991 survey only 81 per cent of cars were so equipped.

Attitudes towards seat belts are also positive. However, in French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino the attitudes in question are slightly less benevolent than in German-speaking Switzerland.

The reported wearing rates are high, but differ according to the road category. The higher the applicable speed limit, the higher the percentage of those who say they always wear a seat belt when driving on the road category in question. Between 1991 and 1996 the wearing rates have increased, but continue to be lower in the French-speaking and Italian-speaking parts of the country than in the German-speaking Switzerland. Observations made by *cap* in 1998 indicated wearing rates of 79 per cent for German-speaking Switzerland, 65 per cent for French-speaking Switzerland and 52 per cent for Italian-speaking Switzerland. On motorways the percentage is higher in each part of the country, in built-up areas lower.

Important influencing factors relating to wearing a seat belt were found to be the conviction that if one drives carefully one doesn't need a seat belt, and an emotional dislike of driving without wearing one.

Exceeding the speed limit

The self-reported frequency of speeding in Switzerland is at the European level. The lower the speed limit, the less frequently it is exceeded. On major roads both outside and inside built-up areas the Swiss exceed the speed limit less often, on motorways as frequently and on minor roads outside built-up areas more frequently than the other Europeans. No significant differences between the different parts of the country could be found in the frequency with which speed limits were exceeded. In comparison with 1991 the frequency with which the speed limit was exceeded in 1996 seems to have decreased on fast roads and increased on slower roads both inside and outside built-up areas.

The answers with regard to the desired speed limits were analogous. Inside built-up areas there was a clear majority of 70 per cent who wished the existing limits to be maintained. Regarding roads outside built-up areas, there was also a majority – although less clear – of more than 60 per cent in favour of maintaining existing speed limits. In respect of motorways, the wish for a higher speed limit was expressed as frequently as the wish that the existing limit be maintained. In the different parts of the country higher limits on motorways in French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino were favoured by a majority of roughly 60 percent in each case. However, from SARTRE 1 to SARTRE 2 there has been marked growth in favour of maintaining the existing limits on all categories of road.

There is no majority in Switzerland with regard to corrective measures that lie within the sphere of responsibility of car manufacturers – in contrast to the position in Western Europe. Neither fitting vehicles with a speed governor nor restrictions on advertising that features speed as a sales argument enjoys an approving majority.

The most important determinants for self-reported driving at excessive speed were found to be:

- age under 40
- deriving pleasure from fast driving
- a general willingness to behave delinquently in road traffic

Concluding remarks

In summary, one can say that in international comparison the statements of Swiss car drivers point to a high degree of road safety. Specific Swiss road safety problems are:

- Frequent driving under the influence of small and larger amounts of alcohol
- Increasingly more permissive attitude to the general consumption of alcohol
- Low subjective perception of police testing activity regarding driving under the influence of alcohol
- Frequent speeding inside and outside built-up areas
- Poor observation of the right of way of pedestrians on pedestrian crossings

The following measures should be considered:

- Breath testing without cause
- The introduction of the 0.5 ‰ limit
- The introduction of an alcohol ban for young drivers
- More frequent police speed checks
- Increased publicity for traffic controls
- Measures to encourage seat-belt wearing
- More psychoeducational interventions and their linkage with the aforementioned measures

Furthermore, programmes to deal with the specific road safety problems of French-speaking Switzerland and Ticino should be developed. These are

- more frequent driving under the influence of alcohol
- less frequent wearing of seat belts
- more pleasure in fast driving
- high annual car mileages (in French-speaking Switzerland)

