



ALAC's Policy on the Blood Alcohol Content Limit

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ALAC wants the legal Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) limit for driving in New Zealand lowered from 80mg/100ml for **adult drivers** down to **50mg/100ml**, and the under-20 year old BAC lowered to **zero for all under-20 year olds**, regardless of licence status. ¹

Introduction

Drinking alcohol, even in small amounts, impairs our actions and judgement. When we drink, we make decisions we wouldn't normally make, and we're unable to respond to situations as quickly as we'd like. ALAC works to minimise harms that result from alcohol misuse, and fatal and serious injury road crashes is one of these harms. By working to reduce alcohol-related road crashes, ALAC is intending to also reduce the incidence of other alcohol harms such as violence, crime and poor health.

In 2007 driver alcohol/drugs was a contributing factor in 117 fatal traffic crashes, 402 serious injury crashes and 1182 minor injury crashes. These crashes resulted in 127 deaths, 559 serious injuries and 1777 minor injuries.¹ This is just one example of a very high and deeply concerning level of harm that alcohol is inflicting on our society.

Background

Drinking alcohol increases a person's chances of being involved in a car crash. New Zealand's legal BAC limits are high by international standards, and best practice overseas is for a legal BAC limit of 50mg/100ml for adults and a zero BAC for young people. A legal BAC of 80mg/100ml sends a message that it is okay to drink and drive, even at relatively low levels of drinking. However we know that the risk of harm occurring, particularly when driving, starts at low levels.

At 80mg/100ml, the current legal adult BAC limit, a driver over 30 years of age is about 16 times as likely to be involved in a fatal crash as the same driver with a zero blood alcohol level. A 15 to 19 year old is about 86 times more likely to be involved in a fatal crash when at the 80mg/100ml limit. See the table below from a New Zealand study²:

¹ Ministry of Transport statistics

² Keall, M.D., Frith W.J., & Patterson, T.L. (2004). The influence of alcohol, age and the number of passengers on the night-time risk of driver injury in New Zealand. *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 36(1), 49-61.

Relative risk of fatal crash by blood alcohol level

BAC	30+ years	20-29 years	15-19 years
0	1	3	5.3
30	2.9	8.7	15
50	5.8	17.5	30.3
80	16.5	50.2	86.6

There is clear evidence of an increase in risk as blood alcohol levels increase, and the effect is much more pronounced in young drivers.

So whilst those drink drivers with very high BAC levels (in excess of 80mg/100ml) do create the most harm, having a BAC of between 50mg/100ml and 80mg/100ml also carries high risk of harm when compared to someone who has a zero BAC.

Not only will a lower legal BAC reduce the number of alcohol related road crashes occurring for drivers with a BAC of between 50mg and 80mg/100ml, research has shown that it will reduce road crashes for drivers at the full range of BAC levels. Research indicates that there have been significant decreases in the number of fatal collisions, serious collisions and single-vehicle collisions in those overseas countries with a 50mg/100mL BAC limit compared with number of these types of collisions occurring when the BAC limit in these jurisdictions was 80mg/100mL as it is currently in New Zealand.

Not only will a lowered legal BAC limit reduce alcohol related road crashes, but it will also send a message about the other harms associated with excessive drinking. It is likely to reduce the incidence of heavy drinking and to moderate our drinking patterns. There is strong overseas evidence that zero tolerance laws among 18 to 20 year olds reduces heavy per occasion consumption drinking (five or more drinks at one sitting) by males by about 13 percent.

Even at low BAC levels, alcohol can impair judgement and increase your chances of being involved in a crash. Young people are at greatest risk of being involved in an alcohol-related crash.