

FACT SHEET NINETEEN

BREATH TESTS IN ENGLAND AND WALES 1994

The police are now finding far fewer motorists' breath tests positive (including a refusal to take a test) than ten years ago, the latest statistics from the Home Office show.

678,500 breath tests were carried out in 1994, the most ever. Of these, 93,000 were positive or refused, the highest recorded number since 1990, but at 14% of the total, the lowest proportion yet recorded.

The chart below shows a steady decline in the proportion of positive or refused tests from the 42% recorded in 1984. While the number of tests carried out has tripled since 1984, the actual number of positive tests is not much greater than in that year, despite having climbed to over 110,000 in 1987 and 1988.

Seasonal variation

1994 conforms to the typical pattern of an increase in the number of tests carried out in the last quarter of the year, rising to a peak during the Christmas campaign. In December the number of tests was more than double that recorded in the rest of the year, but the proportion of positive or refused tests was, at 7%, only half the average for the year, showing the effectiveness of the Christmas campaign against drinking and driving. The summer campaign would seem to be less successful, as the proportion of positive or refused tests hovers around the 15% level during the summer months, with the highest figures being recorded in May.

Regional variation

The police forces with the highest proportion of positive or refused tests were Northumbria (49%), Nottinghamshire (40%), North Yorkshire (37%) and West Midlands (35%). Forces with the lowest rates were Cleveland (6%), Lincolnshire (7%), Cambridgeshire, Derbyshire and the Metropolitan police (all 8%). Such differences may however be due as much to local police policy and procedure as to the incidence of drinking and driving.

The Road Traffic Act 1988

The police can ask someone to be tested if they have reasonable cause to suspect:

- The person has been driving (or attempting to drive) with alcohol in their body;
- That a moving traffic offence has been committed;
- That the person has been involved in an accident.

The prescribed limits are:

- 35 micrograms of alcohol in 100 millilitres of breath
- 80 milligrams of alcohol in 100 ml of blood;
- 107 milligrams of alcohol per 100 ml of urine.

Source: Breath Test Statistics, England and Wales 1994, Home Office Statistical Bulletin 7/95