

A qualitative investigation of drug use among Pakistani road users

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Abstract

Background

Statistics on drug use by Pakistani drivers are not available, yet considerable numbers of drivers are believed to be drug addicted. The National Drug Abuse Assessment 2006/07, conducted by the United Nation Office on Drugs and Crime and the Ministry of Narcotics Control Pakistan reported that opiate users numbered 628,000, of which 77% were chronic heroin abusers. Injecting drug users have reportedly doubled in the decade to 2006 and drug use has been linked with many major crashes involving professional drivers.

Aims

This study explored a broad range of risk taking behaviours of road users, including drug use. It also investigated associations between risky road use and fatalism and other cultural beliefs.

Methods

This paper reports findings relating to drug driving in the cities of Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with bus, truck, and taxi drivers, policy makers and field police officers.

Results

Interviews suggested widespread use of illicit drugs, particularly among bus, truck and taxi drivers. Reasons for drug use included recreational purposes, stimulants during long driving episodes, and substance addiction. Furthermore, the use of drugs and any association with road crashes was generally viewed as linked to fatalism rather than to any fault of an individual. In other words, people did not believe there was an association between drug use and road crashes, even if they had personally experienced such. Police knowledge of drug use among drivers was evident, although there is no formal drug driving testing regime in Pakistan.

Discussion and conclusions

The substantial increase in drug use among the population in recent years highlights a significant public health challenge in Pakistan. This qualitative research, although recognized as not representative of the broader population, suggests that there is significant cause for

concern about drug driving, especially among professional drivers, and a need for further investigation and intervention.

Introduction

Pakistan is located next to Afghanistan, the world's largest producer of illicit opium. This puts Pakistan in a vulnerable position in terms of drug availability and abuse (Zafar & ul Hasan, 2002). The little information available on drug use in Pakistan is summarised below. However, comprehensive statistics on drug use by Pakistani drivers are not currently available.

Survey data on drug use in Pakistan

Every year at least 50,000 more people become addicted to different kinds of drugs in Pakistan (Ministry of Narcotics Control Pakistan, 2011; The Express Tribune, 2011). The number of drug users in Pakistan has gone up from 50,000 in 1980 to 6.2 million in 2006 and 8.1 million in 2011 (Ministry of Narcotics Control Pakistan, 2011). It is estimated that 1 in 27 adults in Pakistan are dependent on drugs (UNODC, 2013). Compared to the 1980s when there was virtually no heroin use in Pakistan, the 1990s witnessed a growing heroin epidemic (Khawaja et. al., 1997). As a proportion of drug abusers, heroin users increased from 7.5 % in 1983 to a shocking 51% in 1993 and 77% in 2006 (Anti-Narcotics Department Pakistan, 2006; UNODC, 2010). The Ministry of Narcotics Control, Pakistan, the Bureau of Statistics, Pakistan, and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime released a collaborative technical summary report in 2013 on drug use in Pakistan. This report confirmed that cannabis is the drug most commonly used by Pakistanis aged 15 to 64 (3.6 per cent of the population, or approximately four million people). Opiate use (heroin or opium) is also widespread with one per cent of the population (one million people) using it. Similarly opioid-based painkiller misuse is also high, involving 1.5 per cent of the population, or nearly 1.7 million people (UNODC, 2013). According to the National Drug Abuse Assessment 2006/07 survey, most of the opioid users were multiple or poly drug users, i.e., they were using more than one substance at a given time or during a day. Therefore many opioid users were using tranquilizers, antihistamines, and other opiates along with heroin as their primary drug of abuse.

Drug use and driving in Pakistan

There is a very little research on drug use among drivers in Pakistan in relation to road safety. However, indirect information from sources such as police and media reports as well as studies in other fields such as HIV/ AIDS (i.e. Khawaja et. al., 1997; Ahmed et. al., 2003; Haque et. al., 2004) suggest a common use of drug related substances among drivers, particularly professional drivers. Mir et al. (2012) conducted a study on alcohol and marijuana use while driving on a sample of 857 commercial bus and truck drivers recruited from the largest commercial vehicle stations in Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Results revealed that almost 10% of truck drivers reported using alcohol, with higher usage reported by truck than bus drivers. Marijuana use was reported by a larger proportion of drivers than was alcohol. Approximately 23% of the sample reported marijuana use, and proportions were higher among truck (30%) than bus drivers (14.7%). The use of alcohol and marijuana together was reported by a smaller proportion (4.6%), and approximately 8% reported use of stimulant pills when driving. With regard to crash history, the study revealed that a greater

proportion of crash-involved drivers (previous 5 years) reported using marijuana than those reporting no crash involvement (30% and 22%, respectively).

Aims

The findings reported in the current paper were drawn from a larger study that explored a broad range of risky road use behaviours. It also investigated associations between risky road use and fatalism and other cultural beliefs. Along with other factors, drug use was mentioned during participant interviews. Therefore, the current paper is focused on extracting the information on drug use and driving, including drug use in general. Specifically, the aim of the current study was to explore reported drug use by professional drivers and the impressions that other groups (including police) had about the significance of drug use among professional drivers.

Methods

Qualitative research was undertaken by the first author in the cities of Lahore, Rawalpindi and Islamabad. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with bus, truck, and taxi drivers, policy makers and field police officers. The professional drivers were recruited primarily at depots, and the other groups were recruited using a mix of convenience and snowball sampling. The interviews were recorded and transcribed in Urdu, and then translated into English. The English transcripts were then analysed thematically. As noted above, the data cited here form a subset of those transcripts where drug use was explored.

Widespread use

Participants believed drug use was widespread and acknowledged their own use:

Interviewer: “How many heavy vehicle drivers you think use drugs while driving?”
“Many drivers use them. About 60 to 70 percent use them.”

Interviewer: “Do you use drugs?”

“Yes, I use drugs while driving.” (During the interview he was smoking a heroin cigarette). **Bus driver, middle school education, 39 years old, male**

Interviewer: “Do drivers use drugs while driving?”

“75% of drivers use drugs in bus, long trailer and truck drivers. I also used to use heroine and chars (cannabis). If you do not believe me so wear clothes like me (look like a driver) and I will give you proof (to see how frequent it is).” **Bus driver, no education, 48 years old, male**

Interviewer: “Some heavy vehicle drivers use drugs, what is their percentage in your view?”

“I think 90% of heavy vehicle drivers use drugs, especially on long routes.” **Police officer, Masters degree, 32 years old, male**

Recreational drug use and drug use to avoid sleepiness

In some cases drug use while driving was reported as being for recreational use, at least in part:

Interviewer: “Why do you use them? What are the benefits while driving?”

“It’s for recreational purpose and we become a human (i.e. feel normal, confident and in control). I do it too for relaxation purpose.” **Bus driver, no education, 48 years old, male**

Not surprisingly, professional drivers spoke of drug use as being necessary to stay alert. Moreover, there appeared to be a belief that opiate use will assist alertness, in contradiction to its known pharmacological properties:

Interviewer: "Have you ever used drugs while driving?"

"Yes sometime we use them so that we don't have sleep and tiredness, and police does not also watch us at night." **Taxi driver, Middle School Education, 32 years old, Male**

"I think it is good (to use drugs). Drivers use drugs because they make them active. It becomes a habit. To avoid sleep on long routes they use drugs, which make them active."

Interviewer: "But I've seen a road accident at ChichaWatni City Bridge in which the driver used heroin and about 50 people died."

"I'm telling you from my experience (of using drugs) that heroin makes you active. It is my experience of whole life that if he had used the heroin he would not have had this accident. It would've been unavailability of heroin to that driver which has led the driver to sleep. Like when you eat food it gives you energy, likewise addicts get their energies back from drugs." **Truck driver, Primary School, 49 years old male**

One police officer reported the belief that recreational drug use was really about maintaining alertness, although the wording used suggests that the local conceptualization of alertness differs from the standard road safety approach (associating "numbing" of the mind with reducing fatigue):

"Driving for too many hours make them use drugs. They want to make their mind numb so that they do not feel tiredness. It is not usually enjoyment." **Police officer, Masters degree, 32 years old, male**

Substance addiction

As might be expected, drivers did not directly acknowledge addiction, although their reports of repeated patterns of use suggest it. There were some responses that indicated that drivers felt there was no choice, implying that addiction is a factor:

Interviewer: "You already stated that you had confronted many road accidents in which many people died. You were also injured. But still as you said drive under drugs and carelessly. Do you not think for yourself and other passengers in the bus? Their life is also in danger?"

"But I do sometimes when I have to do it." **Bus driver, no education, 48 years old Male**

"The government should control this (drug use while driving) because people are addicted to such habits." **Truck driver, middle school, 40 years old, male**

Fate causes crashes, not drugs

Elsewhere we have reported on the pervasiveness of fatalism concerning road crashes in Pakistan (Kayani, King & Fleiter, 2012). This applied to drug use as well:

Interviewer "Why do you do this (use drugs while driving)? Do you think about road accidents that you might face?"

"It's God who protects us." **Bus driver, no education, 48 years old, male**

Legislation and enforcement

As the quotes above indicate, police are aware of the problem:

“The majority of drivers use drugs while driving. Those that use drugs are a curse. Drugs users think they will not feel sleepy. To escape tiredness and sleep they use them.” **Police officer, matriculation level schooling, 52 years old, male**

However legislation and resource constraints mean that drug use while driving receives little police attention. As the taxi driver cited earlier observed, police activity at night is quite low.

Summary of results

The use of drugs was considered by professional drivers to have beneficial effects on alertness, at least under some circumstances. Any association with road crashes was generally viewed as linked to fatalism rather than to any fault of an individual. In other words, people did not believe there was an association between drug use and road crashes, even if they had personally experienced such. Police knowledge of drug use among drivers was evident, although there is no formal drug driving testing regime in Pakistan.

“The majority of (truck) drivers use drugs while driving. Those that use drugs are a curse. Drugs users think they will not feel sleepy. To escape tiredness and sleep they use them. They are harmful for health.” **Police officer, Matric schooling, 52 years old male**

Discussion and conclusions

Drug use data indicate that there has been a substantial increase in drug use among the population in recent years. This is a significant public health challenge in Pakistan in its own right, and our results (while qualitative and utilising a non-random sample) suggest that it is a significant issue among professional drivers as well. The findings are also consistent with the limited previous research conducted among commercial drivers in Pakistan (Mir et al., 2012). There appears to be widespread use of illicit drugs among bus, truck and taxi drivers, for recreational purposes and to combat fatigue, although the rationale for the stimulant effects of opiates is not consistent with their known pharmacological effects. Addiction is likely to be involved as well.

Addressing the problem presents several challenges. Police are aware that drug driving is an issue, but lack the resources and probably the legislative framework that would enable them to pursue enforcement to reduce drug driving. Many drivers themselves are fatalistic (Kayani et al., 2012), which means that it is difficult to convince them of the link between drug use and crash risk. There is clearly a need for further investigation and intervention.

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