

## Brazil targets drink driving on the road to fewer deaths

Despite a longstanding commitment to improving road safety, Brazil's numerous initiatives have suffered from weak enforcement. Tough new legislation backed by even tougher policing promises a new start. Claudia Jurberg reports.

Jonas Licurgo Ferreira was drunk the night he crashed his car. The 41-year-old resident of Rio de Janeiro had been drinking heavily with a soldier friend who was messing around with a gun in the car when it happened. He hit a post. The gun went off, putting a bullet into Ferreira's spine. "Now I am paraplegic because of a gunshot," he says. But he knows that the real harm was done by the alcohol. "If we had not been drinking so much my friend would not have been playing with the gun, and I would not have hit the post."

Ferreira is just one of 600 000 people involved in crashes on Brazilian roads each year who live to talk about it. Another 40 000 are not so lucky. Brazil, the world's fifth most populous country, ranks also fifth in terms of annual road traffic mortality with 18 deaths per 100 000 inhabitants, according to WHO. Until recently those numbers were getting steadily worse.

In February 2011, a traffic collision monitoring system was launched by Brazil's justice ministry in collaboration with the Sangari Institute, a non-profit

organization. The system found that between 1998 and 2008 the number of annual deaths on Brazil's roads had increased by 20% (from 31 000 to 39 000). Within that steep increase were hidden some even more alarming trends, notably a fourfold increase in cyclist fatalities and more than a sevenfold leap in motorcycle deaths to nearly 9000 in 2008. The principal victims were teenagers.

“Now when people want to go out for a drink they take public transport.”

Marco Andrade

Apart from the price paid in human misery, disability and death, road traffic collisions cost Brazil about US\$ 32 billion a year, according to the Institute of Applied

Economic Research. Otaliba Libânio, director of the Department of Health Situation Analysis at the health ministry, says that the high toll of road traffic injuries and deaths has long been a matter of concern and that several federal, state and municipal initiatives have been launched since 2001 to bring about change.

Two core problems have hindered progress in Brazil: the first is inadequate enforcement of the laws in place; the second is entrenched attitudes to drinking and, particularly, drinking and driving – although this may be changing. Brazilians love to party and alcoholic beverages – an important part of this festive culture – are cheap and widely available, even at gas stations (on state, municipal and urban roads but not on federal highways). In recent years, it has been during the famous Brazilian carnival that the toll of road deaths and injuries has hit some of the highest recorded levels.

“Brazil is one of a handful of countries that has gone beyond the maximum recommended blood-alcohol concentration limit to institute a stricter limit for the general population.”

Alison Harvey

To address both weak enforcement and drink-driving, the government pushed through new legislation in 2008. The *Lei Seca* (Dry Law) makes it a criminal offence to drive with a blood-alcohol concentration of 6 decigrams per litre or higher. The penalty for infringement is six months to three years imprisonment, although fines and driving bans can also apply. As currently applied, the law is even more stringent, setting the limit at 2 decigrams, well below international best practice, which requires a blood-alcohol concentration limit of less than



Bruno Macchitute

Jonas Licurgo Ferreira on night duty with a team of Operation Dry Law enforcement officers

5 decigrams per litre. “Brazil is one of a handful of countries that has gone beyond the maximum recommended blood-alcohol concentration limit to institute a stricter limit for the general population,” says Alison Harvey, a road safety expert at the World Health Organization (WHO). “It’s an indication that drink-driving is taken seriously as an important problem.”

Just how seriously was shown by a 2008 presidential decree calling for zero tolerance of alcohol in the bloodstream while driving – an idea that was not taken up for reasons of workability. “Zero tolerance sends a useful message, but in practice blood-alcohol concentration limits of 0.0 can be difficult to enforce since blood-alcohol concentration is most often estimated using breath analyzers,” Harvey explains. Even when a person has not consumed alcoholic beverages they may still test positive for a small concentration of alcohol or similar compounds in their breath for a variety of reasons, such as using an alcohol-based mouthwash or eating chocolate liqueurs. A margin of tolerance is needed so that drivers are not unjustly charged.

Passing legislation is one thing; enforcing it is another. While all of Brazil’s jurisdictions have embraced the law, only two have zealously enforced it, according to Libânio. One is the state of Rio de Janeiro – with what is known as *Operação Lei Seca* (Operation Dry Law) and the other is the federal capital, Brasília.

“Thousands of lives have been saved since we started,” says Major Marco

Andrade, the general coordinator of Operation Dry Law in Rio de Janeiro state. Since the law was implemented in 2008, Ministry of Health data shows a 32% decline in road traffic deaths in Rio de Janeiro state, compared to a decline of only 6.2% during the same period in states where the Dry Law has not been fully enforced.

Operation Dry Law depends more on shock than stealth. Setting up tents and hoisting enormous balloons into the air showing the Operation Dry Law logo on major roads in Rio de Janeiro state, every day seven teams of a total of 140 enforcement officers pull cars over randomly, verify papers and carry out breath analyzer tests.

A driver who refuses to cooperate is fined (about US\$ 600). His car is impounded on the spot, unless a relative or friend comes to fetch it. Drivers with a blood-alcohol concentration of more than 3.2 decigrams per litre are arrested and can only apply for bail the following day. If they are unable to put up money for bail, they may be behind bars for several weeks until a court appearance.

One of those enforcement officers is Jonas Licurgo Ferreira. After the crash, his girlfriend left him. “I tried to commit suicide. I felt I was the only person on earth in a wheelchair. Sport saved my life,” he says. Through basketball, he recovered mentally and now he wants to compete in the Paralympic Games in Rio 2016.

In 2009, Jonas became a pioneer of the wheelchair campaigners working as an Operation Dry Law enforcement officer. “Before, I tried to take my life,” Jonas says. “Now I am here saving other peoples’ lives.”

According to Andrade in the past two years his teams have inspected nearly 500 000 vehicles, more than 25 000 vehicles each month. About 83 000 drivers incurred fines and about 36 000 of them had their licences revoked during that period. More than 1500 drivers were arrested. Set against the backdrop of the five million or so cars in circulation in the state as a whole, not to mention the additional 1.2 million cars in the capital, Brasília, there is still a long way to go. Andrade is the first to admit that his resources are limited. The Rio de Janeiro State Traffic Police is also helping, working alongside the Operation Dry Law enforcers on public holidays.

Fortunately he is not working alone and in the coming years more Operation

Dry Law-style initiatives may take to the streets in other states too. Brazil is one of the countries included in the Road Safety in 10 Countries project (RS10), which is to be implemented over five years by a consortium of six international partners, coordinated by WHO and funded by a grant from Bloomberg Philanthropies.

Each of the 10 countries participating in the RS10 project selected two risk factors on which to concentrate. Brazil chose drink-driving reduction and speed management. RS10 implementation sites include one state capital in each of the five major geographical regions of the country.

When the RS10 project was launched in Brazil in June 2010, it was named after a pre-existing road safety initiative called *Projeto Vida no Trânsito* (Life in Traffic Project) to emphasize the notion of improving the quality of life in general, rather than merely addressing two risk factors.

An important part of the Life in Traffic initiative is improving road collision data that can be used as a basis for designing road safety campaigns. Another important element is education because – even with bigger road safety enforcement dragnets – initiatives like Operation Dry Law will never suffice on their own to bend the curve on road death and injury statistics. For one thing people, especially tech-savvy young people, are finding ways to circumvent the law, using social media such as Twitter to tell others where police raids are located on any given night. But getting out on the street does send a message and Andrade stresses the fact that his enforcement officers are out there every day in all weather. “Citizens need to know that raids can happen every day of the week,” he says.

But for the numbers to really change, attitudes must change too. Andrade understands this and makes sure that his enforcement officers also get out into the community giving talks in schools and universities on drink-driving and on prevention of road traffic collisions. They also visit bars, restaurants and nightclubs to alert young people to the dangers of drink driving and speeding and to galvanize support from the public.

Thus far the approach seems to be working in Rio de Janeiro state. According to Andrade, the programme has broad public support and behaviour is changing. “Now when people want to go out for a drink they take public transport,” he says. ■



Bruno Macchilute

Operation Dry Law relies more on shock than stealth