

Summary:

Effects of increased fixed penalties on road user compliance with traffic law

During the last 10 years, fixed penalties for traffic law violations have been increased several times in Norway. The purpose of this report is to evaluate the effects of these increases on road user compliance with traffic law. The study is confined to speed limit violations and non-wearing of seat belts. These are the only types of violations for which reliable data can be obtained from 1995 (speed) or 1979 (seat belts).

Several sources of data have been used in the study. Surveys of road users made in the years 1998-2002 show that, on the average, road users are well informed about the levels of fixed penalties. The frequency of self reported speed violations did not change very much between 1998 and 2002.

Speed is routinely measured at automatic traffic counting stations operated by the Public Roads Administration. Data from a sample of 34 such stations were used to analyse annual changes from 1995 to 2003 in the percentage of drivers violating speed limits. A tendency was found for the percentage of violations to increase. No effect of the increases in fixed penalties for speeding was found.

Speed is also measured at locations where speed cameras have been installed. Data from 33 such locations were used in the study. A tendency was found for increased fixed penalties to be associated with a reduction in the percentage of violators. Although this tendency was not statistically significant, it was consistent in all analyses.

These apparently inconsistent findings can probably be explained in terms of differences between speed camera locations and the rest of the road system with respect to the risk of apprehension. When the risk of being apprehended is high, as it is at the speed camera locations, stricter penalties, in the form of higher traffic tickets for offences of a given severity may have a deterrent effect. Making penalties stricter will, on the other hand, not have a similar deterrent effect if the risk of apprehension is low, as it is for speeding in general.

Seat belt wearing was found to increase when the fixed penalty for not wearing them increased. The effect of increased fixed penalty was largest in urban areas, where the percentage of violations is higher than in rural areas.

Some models of enforcement suggest that the police will reduce enforcement if penalties are made more severe. This study found no evidence of such a behavioural adaptation by the police.

The report contains an international comparison of the levels of fixed penalties for traffic violations. These penalties tend to be higher in Norway than in other highly motorised countries.