RESEARCH-INTERVENTION ON THE CONSTANT USE OF THE
SEATBELT BY THE MUNICIPAL POLICE OFFICERS.

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A research conducted by SIPSiVi in 1998 in North Italy shows a lack of knowledge of the Italian drivers about the seatbelt law and rules, so the previous introduction and enforcement of this law in Italy seems not to be very effective.

According with our hypothesis, Italian drivers don’t have a particular resistance to the road safety rules, but the lack of respect of road laws seems to be associated with the inconstancy, incongruent and non coordinated intervention of the police officers: for instance, the control of speed limit violations in Italy, counted on the number of fines given, is equivalent with the French one, while the fines for unfastened seatbelt in Italy is greatly smaller than in the other European countries; therefore the Italian drivers have never developed the behaviour to fasten their seatbelts until making it a habit: in the SARTRE 2 survey, the Italian percentage of seta-belt wearing in towns was the lowest in Europe after Greece, and so was the number of Italian drivers stating “without my seat-belt, I don’t feel comfortable, as something was missing”.

We strongly believe that a constant use of the seatbelt by the police is the first step to have the officers themselves respect the law and have the Italian drivers to respect the seatbelt rules; thus showing a positive model. In fact, as long as the officers don’t use constantly the seatbelt, they don’t strongly believe in the enforcement of this rule with the drivers; and this points out a contradiction between their driving behaviour and the enforcing behaviour.

The Italian law seems to foster this contradiction because it is quite ambiguous on when and in which situations the officer must fasten his/her seatbelt: they are obliged to wear it, “except in case of emergency”. It clearly depends on his perception of when to do it or not to do it.

Since it has been demonstrated that the personal perception of the need of using the seatbelt is often undertaking the real risk while driving, it has been necessary to develop a method to enhance and make more constant the use of the seatbelt by the police officers.

The following actions have been used:

1) Periodical, random observation of the use of the seatbelt by the police officers in 15 sample cities; the policemen having their seat belt were ¼ their citizen, but with the same prejudice of the citizens: the few policemen wearing were:
   - coming from another town, so demonstrating the major use outside the towns;
   - not driving, so demonstrating the dependence of the wearing from the self-confidence;
   - never sitting behind, like the normal citizen never do it, the law being ignored.

2) Motivational groups at the police stations in order to face the reactions, the attitudes, the behaviours and the conditions for a change in the “driving styles”

3) Development of a questionnaire to assess the attitudes of the officers on the seatbelt use, and to have the seatbelt law respected by the drivers as well as the passengers

4) Dissemination of the results of the research to the newspapers and through seminars

5) Systematic campaign to sensitise the target group on this important issue
6) Second systematic observation on the driving behaviour and revision of final version of the questionnaire to assess change of behaviour on the use of seatbelt

As a result of our intervention, while the first studies showed that in June 1999 only 4% of officers used seatbelts, an year later, in June 2000, we had a 35% of officers wearing their seatbelts; thus showing a significant increase in the use of seatbelts among police officers as drivers and passengers. The following observation of the seatbelt behaviour conducted in October 2000 shows that the percentage increased to 60%. This should be a great incentive to continue and implement this kind of intervention.

METHODOLOGY

The first part of the research has started in May 1999 and can be synthesized in the following actions:
- An introductory letter of the research to the police station’s chief has been sent, announcing the whole programme, its motivations and goals;
- A direct observation on the field of the actual situation of the seat belt use in 14 cities has been conducted;
- Two motivational groups to create the pilot questionnaire to be administered to the police officers have been conducted;
- After the pilot phase, the questionnaire has been administered to the police officers of the 14 cities where the behaviour observation on the field was conducted;
- The data elaboration has been done with S.P.S.S. Software;
- Finally the conclusion and results have been disseminated and reported to the police’s regional chief.

People involved in the work: in one side, six researchers, a university docent in psycho sociology of traffic of the University of Vienna (Prof. Ralf Risser), the SIPSiVi’s staff and the Regione Piemonte, municipal police department. In the other side, of a total of 4459 police officers in the Piedmont Region, 2333 have actively participated to the research (with a representative distribution: gender, age, grade...), another part contributed in meetings and vary activities but the entire corps has been involved in the behavioural observation on the field.

The results of the behavioural observation shows us that the police officers were wearing their seatbelt four times less than the citizens; (respectively the 4% of the P.O. and the 16% for the citizens).

From the analysis of these cases, we found that the police officers not wearing the seatbelts do not have any specific justification for not respecting the rule, in particular the emergency situation. In fact no one emergency has ever been found during the observation to justify the lack of use of the seatbelt.

To the contrary, they are just victims of the same preconceptions of the citizens against the use of the seatbelts, but in an exaggerate way: (quadruplicate exactly)

Therefore the questionnaire, administered after the observation on the field, didn’t have the purpose to find out how much and often the police officers wear their seatbelt, but indeed to understand what exactly keep them away from respecting the seatbelt law.

As a matter of fact, one of our principal goal became, during the work, to fight the illusion that not wearing the seatbelt is a privilege. The analysis of the accident of Princess Diana, proposed in the motivational group, was very useful, because each policeman could bring his identification into the young agent wearing the seat belt, and progressively into the other three persons involved, characterized by a wrong translation of prestige into law elusion.
We wait from SARTRE 3 the final results of this change into the population, but the first, not systematic observations, sown a wide increase of seat-belt use in the same towns of the Policemen involved in this programme.

All the Policemen asked finally to continue the work in order to expand this experience to the scholars, and from the scholars to the grown-ups.