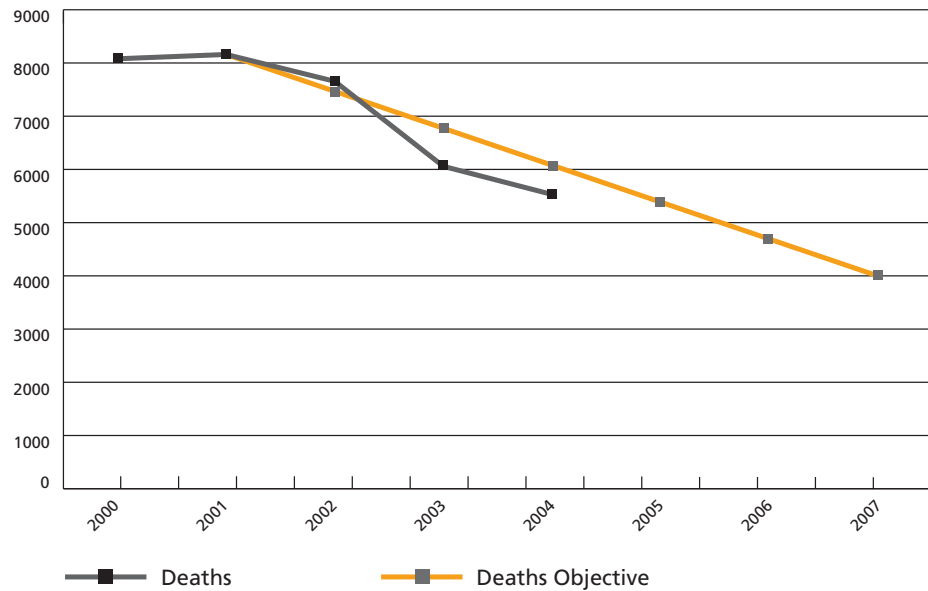


6.8 FRANCE



General Road Safety: In France, it was the President of the Republic himself who has declared road safety one of the three top priorities of his second term in office (2002-2007). Following this declaration, a first États-Généraux was held in September 2002 gathering all the different stakeholders. A new road safety strategy was worked out, which featured prominently measures to end drivers' "feeling of impunity" regarding road traffic offences. The inter-ministerial committee (CISR) responsible for road safety has since met twice a year to monitor and ensure the continuation of progress.

Although France has not adopted a road safety target officially, Internal Affairs Minister Nicolas Sarkozy has announced a new objective for 2007 when no more than 4,000 people should die in traffic per year. In effect, this would mean a 50% reduction based on the 2001 figure (8,160) within only six years.

This optimism is well-grounded as France, still among the less-than-average performing EU countries in 2001, has seen a rapid improvement of road safety over the past years. Between 2001 and 2004, deaths have dropped by 32% and injured by 29%. In 2005, France has brought its yearly deaths toll to just under 5,000. The success has mainly been attributed to improved road user behaviour in the areas of speed, alcohol and seat belts - the key focus of French road safety policy since 2002.

Speed: Fully automatised speed control has been at the heart of France's new road safety strategy. A first set of digital cameras was introduced in late 2003, and 1,000 cameras (700 fixed and 300 mobile) were in use by the end of 2005. There are plans to extend this number to 1,500 (1,000 fixed and 500 mobile) by the end of 2006. In 2004 alone, the Gendarmerie nationale multiplied its hours spent on speed enforcement by three, using 190 new mobile detection systems.

A first evaluation of the new system has found that the first 70 devices that were installed in 2003 helped to reduce crashes at camera sites by 85%. Generally speeds and accidents decreased for all types of traffic even though at the time of the evaluation, lorry and motorbike speeds could not yet be enforced. Today, more than 50% of the devices in use are configured to control also motorbike speeds.

Drivers' attitudes towards speeds have changed drastically. In a survey of March 2005, 68% of drivers declared that they had reduced their speed on motorways during the past two years. And in the SARTRE survey of 2005, only 10% of French drivers admitted anymore to breaking the speed limit "often" or "very often", against 22% in previous surveys carried out in 2002 and 1996.

The rate of speeding as measured by the French Road Safety Observatory, has indeed decreased on the whole of the French road network, but most significantly on interurban motorways (“autoroutes de liaison”) and roads with a 2x2 lane configuration. Especially the rate of very large speed infringements has dropped dramatically. However speeding continues to be a mass phenomenon with close to 48% of all vehicles exceeding the legal speed limits (21.5% by more than 10%) in 2004.

Alcohol: In July 2003, the number of points lost for alcohol levels up to 0.8 mg/ml was raised from three to six points. For drivers with a full driving licence this halves the number of points available, while a licence on probation is lost completely. In 2004, the number of drink driving controls was increased by 15% and targeted actions delivered a higher score of detections. The total number of detected offences increased slightly by 5%. France also conducted the Belgian-modelled “capitaine de soirée” campaign.

As a result, fatal accidents related to drink driving dropped by 11% from 2003 to 2004. The improvement in drink driving behaviour contributed to close to 40% of the 2004 fatality reduction, which means that another 189 lives could be saved.

Seat belts: In 2003, the penalty for non-use of the seat belt was increased from 1 to 3 points off the licence and controls tightened significantly. The number of fines charged for non-use of seat belts went up by 15%. Consequently, seat belt use by front seat occupants increased from 91% in 2001/2002 to 95% in 2003.

In 2004, the number of detected offences dropped by 20%. Wearing rates continued however to rise and 96.4 % of front seat occupants were using their belts. In spring 2004, the Transport Ministry launched a new hard-hitting campaign to address seat belt wearing in the back.

Follow-up of offences: Since 2002, sanctions for all types of offences have been tightened and the possibility of “getting away with it” has diminished. Most notably, speeding procedures are fully digitalised so tickets arrive in the car owner’s mailbox within 48 hours after the infringement. While car owners have the right to name another driver or appeal, they have to deposit an amount equivalent to the fine before the case is transferred to court for further processing. This deposit is paid in merely 0.8% of all cases, whereas 64% of the tickets are paid within two weeks.

The total of detected traffic offences increased by about 30% from 2003 to 2004, essentially due to the increasing number of speeding offences. Speeding tickets issued on the basis of automated methods more than doubled, those issued on the basis of other methods increased by 16%. As a result, both the level of fines paid and the number of penalty points that were withdrawn have risen dramatically in 2004, 106 million euros alone were paid in fines for speeding offences detected by automated control. While in 2003, 4.5 million points were withdrawn, resulting in 21,000 invalid licences, this figure was 6.4 million points in 2004, resulting in 39,000 invalid licences.

Information: Awareness campaigns are run by different governmental and non-governmental bodies, and the implementation of the new enforcement strategy has been accompanied by extensive media coverage.

Fixed speed cameras are indicated by traffic signs and their location is also made known on the Internet. Mobile speed checks have also been announced by traffic signs in the past but this will no longer be the case.

Recommendations:

- Continue increasing levels of speed enforcement as even a planned 1,000 fixed cameras will not yet deliver a density equal to that of the UK whose road network length is only about half that of France.
- Strengthen road safety education from the youngest age to increase public acceptance of safety rules and their enforcement.
- Establish a separate road traffic police to ensure high levels of enforcement can be kept up at all times.
- Systematically control seat belt wearing also in the rear during every traffic check.