

Ontario's Impaired driving numbers continue to rise

By Bill Kilpatrick

According to a Dec. 30 press release by the east region headquarters of the OPP, which includes the Bancroft area, "The number of impaired drivers continues to increase." By Jan 3, the festive RIDE program that began on Nov. 21 saw officers conduct nearly 1,200 festive RIDE checks that resulted in 113 motorists being charged with impaired driving and another 29 warning-range suspensions. Despite the best efforts of the OPP and Mothers Against Drunk Driving to educate and dissuade drivers with punishments that range from having a criminal record, to jail time, having their license suspended, and their vehicle impounded, the numbers of impaired drivers continues to increase in Ontario. According to statistics released by the Ontario government 1 in 3 accidents that occur on Ontario motorways is a result of impaired driving. But despite it being common knowledge that impaired driving is illegal and dangerous, education and even deterrents such as those listed above, do not seem to be enough to stop people from engaging in impaired driving.

An article released by Statistics Canada shows that overall impaired driving is trending downwards. "Nationally," the article explains, "[police reported 71,602 incidents of impaired driving in 2023, for a rate of 179 per 100,000 population](#), the fourth consecutive annual decline and the lowest rate on record," but the same cannot be said for Ontario. A CTV article pointed out that in 2023 OPP laid more than 10,000 impaired driving charges, a 16 per cent increase over 2022 and as of June of this year police had laid 3,339 impaired driving charges up from 3,247 during the same period in 2023, according to a CBC article. What is happening here? If education and deterrence are not enough to keep the number of impaired drivers trending downward then what will? In short, why do people continue to do it despite the consequences and the risks? As Rodney Rousel, a father whose 15-year-old daughter was killed by a drunk driver, told CBC, "There's no excuse these days. Everyone knows drinking and driving is wrong and it kills."

Michael Weinrath, a criminal justice professor at the University of Winnipeg, studied drunk driving recidivism rates and it seems there is no simple answer. He told Global News that the decrease in the 1980's was a result of people becoming more health conscious combined with increased penalties, but despite new laws in Ontario that allow police to request a breathalyser test without suspicion, and new safe drinking guidelines by Health Canada released in 2023 that recommended less than two drinks a week to be "low-risk," the number of impaired drivers in Ontario continues to climb. In the article Weinrath pointed out that the odds of getting caught driving impaired is about 1000-1 and that "people are still drinking and driving because they aren't being caught." Weinrath added that when people choose to drink and drive it often stems from them not "thinking they are as drunk as they are" or because it has become a pattern, "It may be you are nervous at first and you don't see any police cars," he told Global News, "[but] you are less worried the next time."

While Weinrath's 1997 study did "provide some support that longer [jail] sentences will deter drunk driving," much of his "results did not support the general theory of crime." For example Weinrath pointed out that, "'low self-control' offenders were deterred, and stress did not have a differential impact on them. Coping resources such as education, employment and social support did not appear to reduce recidivism. The strongest and most consistent recidivism predictors involved alcohol consumption." Given this finding, the province's choice to make alcohol more available to Ontarians in 2024 will most likely increase impaired driving rates. Regarding the policy impact of his findings Weinrath stated, "From a policy perspective, the results of this dissertation suggest that drunk driving would be discouraged in some cases by longer sentences. However, intermittent sentences appear to be used appropriately by the courts for lower risk cases. Treatment programs focussing on stress management, reduced alcohol consumption and specific drinking avoidance strategies are recommended to reduce recidivism."

With the province to introduce new tougher penalties for impaired driving including a life-time license suspension for someone convicted of impaired driving causing death, the hope is to begin to bring those numbers back down, but with the province's choice to deregulate alcohol sales, making alcohol more available, they are sending mixed messages. Speaking to the ongoing problem of impaired driving and the proposed legislation, Steve Sullivan, CEO of MADD Canada, said, "Despite progress, too many people are still making the choice to drive impaired, and we need to ensure sanctions hold drivers accountable while focusing on reducing

recidivism.?