The Road Safety Monitor 2005

Drinking and Driving
The Traffic Injury Research Foundation

The mission of the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) is to reduce traffic-related deaths and injuries.

TIRF is a national, independent, charitable road safety institute. Since its inception in 1964, TIRF has become internationally recognized for its accomplishments in a wide range of subject areas related to identifying the causes of road crashes and developing programs and policies to address them effectively.
The Road Safety Monitor 2005

Drinking and Driving

Douglas J. Beirness
Herb M. Simpson
Daniel R. Mayhew
Katharine Desmond
Financial support provided by:

Primary sponsors:

Transport Canada

![Transport Canada Logo]

Brewers of Canada

![Brewers of Canada Logo]

Toyota Canada Inc.

![Toyota Canada Inc. Logo]

Additional support provided by:

Canada Safety Council
# Table of Contents

Executive Summary .................................................................................................................. iii

The Road Safety Monitor ........................................................................................................1
  Rationale 1
  Structure 1

Method .................................................................................................................................... 3

Survey Results .......................................................................................................................... 5
  PUBLIC CONCERN 5
    Where does the issue of drinking and driving sit on the public agenda? 5
    Is drinking and driving still a major road safety issue? 6
  DRINKING AND DRIVING PRACTICES 7
    How many Canadians drive after drinking? 7
    How many Canadians drive when they think they are over the legal limit? 8
    How often do Canadians drive after drinking? 9
    Trends: Is the problem getting better or worse? 9
    Summary of findings on drinking and driving practices 11
  TAKING ACTION AGAINST DRINKING AND DRIVING 12
    Level of support for various measures 12
    The BAC limit for drivers 13

Bibliography ......................................................................................................................... 15
Executive Summary

♦ The Road Safety Monitor is an annual public opinion survey by the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) that takes the pulse of the nation on key road safety issues by means of a comprehensive telephone survey of a random, representative sample of Canadian drivers.

♦ The results from this fifth edition of the Road Safety Monitor are being released in a series of reports that cover several key issues – the present report focuses on drinking and driving.

♦ Results show that drinking and driving remains a priority social issue for Canadians. They also believe it is the most important road safety issue they face – over 8 out of every 10 Canadians believe it is a serious problem.

♦ Trends show that since 1998 the reported prevalence of driving after drinking as well as the prevalence of “driving while impaired” have been declining. However, the gains in recent years have not been as pronounced.

♦ The vast majority of Canadians (about 85%) say they have not driven after drinking at any time in the past month.

♦ On the other hand, about 15% of Canadian drivers -- an estimated 3.2 million -- said they have driven after drinking sometime in the past month.

♦ The vast majority of Canadians (over 93%) say that in the past year, they have not driven when they felt they were over the legal limit.

♦ On the other hand, 6.7%, or an estimated 1.5 million drivers, said that they had done so, meaning there were over 7.8 million trips in the past year during which the driver felt they were over the legal limit.

♦ 84% of all these impaired driving trips are accounted for by less than 3% of drivers.

♦ Canadian drivers support a variety of initiatives to deal effectively with drinking and driving, such as alcohol ignition interlocks and impounding the vehicles of those who fail a breath test.

♦ Only 17% of Canadian drivers believe the current BAC limit of 80 mg/dl in the Criminal Code should be lower.

♦ Only about one-third of drivers are aware that a lower alcohol threshold actually exists in their province, which can result in a 12- or 24-hour driving suspension.
The Road Safety Monitor

The Road Safety Monitor is an annual public opinion survey developed by the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) to take the pulse of the nation on key road safety issues.

The survey examines:

♦ what Canadians see as priority road safety issues and how concerned they are about them;
♦ their views about how to deal with these problems;
♦ how they behave on the highways; and
♦ what they know and don’t know about safe driving practices.

Rationale

Information on public knowledge about road safety issues is valuable for determining the specific areas where awareness needs to be heightened and knowledge improved. Information on public attitudes toward road safety, and information about driving habits and safety practices is valuable for guiding program development and policy decisions.

Annual monitoring in these areas permits an assessment of changes in knowledge and awareness as well as changes in safety practices and in the level of concern about persisting problems; it also helps identify new and emerging issues.

Structure

The TIRF Road Safety Monitor is designed to assess public opinion, awareness, knowledge, and practices on a broad range of important traffic safety issues. It includes a core set of questions that are asked each year to provide information on trends in attitudes, opinions and behaviours. This is supplemented by a set of questions that probe more deeply into special, topical, and emerging issues.

Reports from the four previous editions of the Road Safety Monitor (2001 to 2004) can be accessed at: www.trafficinjuryresearch.com/publications/publications.cfm. This, the fifth edition of the TIRF Road Safety Monitor, is being released in a series of reports. This first report examines attitudes, perceptions, and practices related to driving after the consumption of alcohol.
This fifth edition of the TIRF Road Safety Monitor contained 75 items designed to probe the knowledge, attitudes, and concerns of Canadians with respect to a range of road safety issues and to obtain information on their driving practices. The survey required an average of approximately 14 minutes to complete.

The survey was administered by telephone to a random sample of Canadian drivers. Opinion Search Inc. conducted the interviews in September, 2005. The Road Safety Monitor has typically been fielded in May. Although there is no reason to suspect that road safety attitudes and behaviours should vary differ substantially between the two periods, comparisons with previous years should be made with appropriate caution.

Among the 5,994 households in which a person was contacted and asked to participate, 4,195 (70%) refused, 66 (1.1%) terminated early, and 515 (8.6%) were not qualified.

A total of 1,218 drivers completed the interview. The data were weighted to ensure the results were representative of the national population. Based on a sample of this size, the results can be considered accurate within 2.8%, 19 times out of 20 (most conservative estimate).
PUBLIC CONCERN

Where does the issue of drinking and driving sit on the public agenda?

Canadians continue to see drinking and driving as a major social issue. When asked to rate their level of concern about a number of social issues on a scale from 1 (not at all concerned) to 6 (extremely concerned), Canadians expressed the greatest concern about drinking and driving. Figure 1 shows the percent of respondents who are “very concerned” or “extremely concerned” about seven social issues. As can be seen, concern about drinking and driving exceeds that of other social issues such as the state of the health care system, pollution, and airline safety. Indeed, 81% of Canadians indicate they are “very concerned” or “extremely concerned” about drinking and driving.

Figure 1: Concern About Social Issues

Not surprisingly, given that the survey was conducted at a time when the price of gasoline rose to over a dollar per litre across Canada, concern about the price of gas ranked a close second to drinking and driving, with 80% of respondents being very concerned or extremely concerned about it. This illustrates how a very salient, topical
issue can vault to the forefront of social concerns. However, such issues are usually not enduring – the extent of concern over the price of gas is likely to wane relatively quickly as either the price declines or it becomes normative and accepted.

In contrast, the level of concern about drinking and driving has not faltered – it has been at the top of the list of public concerns in each year of the Road Safety Monitor. This deep, long-standing concern about a persistent social issue has not waned. The public has not become complacent and drinking and driving remains a priority issue for Canadians.

The continued level of public concern about drinking and driving is certainly justified by the relative persistence of the problem in recent years. In 2003, the most recent year for which data are available, 902 people died in road crashes in Canada involving a drinking driver (Mayhew et al. 2005). As shown in Figure 2, following very substantial gains from 1995 through to 2000, in recent years the number of people who died in crashes involving a drinking driver on Canadian roadways has not declined as rapidly. Drinking drivers continue to account for over 30% of roadway deaths. Canadians have reason to be concerned.

![Figure 2: Number of Persons Killed in Crashes Involving a Drinking Driver](image_url)

**Is drinking and driving still a major road safety issue?**

Not only do Canadians regard drinking and driving as a societal issue of concern, they also see it as the most serious road safety issue facing them today. Figure 3 shows the average rating of the perceived seriousness of a number of road safety issues – a rating of 1 represents “not a problem at all” and 6 represents “an extremely serious problem”. As can be seen, Canadians feel that drinking and driving is the most serious road safety problem. The general issue of drinking and driving and the more specific one of young
drivers impaired by alcohol or drugs topped the list of road safety issues, ahead of other issues, such as running red lights, speeding, sleepy drivers, drivers using cell phones, and children on ATVs. In fact, 85% of respondents said that drinking and driving and young impaired drivers were a “very serious” or “extremely serious” road safety problem.

Figure 3: Perceived Seriousness of Road Safety Issues

![Figure 3: Perceived Seriousness of Road Safety Issues](image)

**DRINKING AND DRIVING PRACTICES**

**How many Canadians drive after drinking?**

Most Canadians are extremely concerned about the problem of driving after drinking and, consistent with this concern, most say they do not drink and drive. Indeed, when asked about their own personal practices, 85.3% of the drivers surveyed said they had not driven a vehicle within two hours of consuming alcohol anytime during the past 30 days.

On the other hand, it is evident that some Canadians still drink and drive. The survey revealed that 14.7% of the drivers surveyed said they had driven a vehicle within two hours of consuming alcohol sometime during the past 30 days. Given public sensitivities and expectations surrounding such questions, this should be regarded as a conservative estimate.
Even at that, it translates into a problem that is anything but insignificant. When applied to the entire population of licensed drivers, it indicates that an estimated 3.2 million Canadians have driven within two hours of consuming alcohol in the month prior to the survey.

However, there are substantial differences in drinking and driving as a function of age, as shown in Figure 4. About 15% of drivers between 16 and 24 years of age report having driven within two hours of consuming alcohol during the 30 days prior to the survey. Drivers between the ages of 25 and 34 are the most likely to drive after drinking (19% report doing so). Drivers 65 years of age and over are least likely to drive after drinking.

![Figure 4: Percent Who Report Driving Within Two Hours of Drinking in Past 30 Days by Age](image)

**How many Canadians drive when they think they are over the legal limit?**

Survey respondents were also asked if they had driven at some time during the past 12 months when they thought they were probably over the legal limit -- 6.7% responded affirmatively. When applied to the population of licensed drivers in Canada, it means that approximately 1.5 million Canadians drove in the past year when they thought they were over the legal limit!

1 Based on an estimated 22 million licensed drivers.
How often do Canadians drive after drinking?

Although 15% of Canadians admit to driving after drinking, most of them do so infrequently. Among respondents who say they have driven within two hours of drinking, almost two-thirds said they had done so only once or twice in the previous month. But about 16% of drinking drivers (about 2.3% of all drivers) said they had done so more than four times in the previous month.

As noted in the previous section, 6.7% of Canadians admit that during the past year they drove when they thought they were over the legal limit. Using the reported frequency of the behaviour, it can be estimated that in the past year there were over 7.8 million trips during which the driver thought they were over the legal limit.

Despite the considerable prevalence of the behaviour, a small proportion of drivers accounts for most of the “impaired” driving trips. Indeed, 84% of all the “impaired” driving trips are accounted for by less than 3% of licensed drivers. This latter finding is entirely consistent with a large body of research which has shown that a small group of individuals accounts for most of the impaired driving and most of the resultant damage on the road (Beirness et al. 1997; Simpson and Mayhew 1991; Simpson et al. 2004; Sweedler 1995). It has also been argued that these persistent drinking drivers now comprise the core of the drinking driver problem explaining in large part why the gains in recent years have been less dramatic. Dealing effectively with this group should yield further more impressive declines in the magnitude of the problem.

Trends: Is the problem getting better or worse?

This is the fifth consecutive year in which the Road Safety Monitor has measured drinking and driving and impaired driving behaviour among Canadians, so the data can be examined to determine if there have been changes over time. Figure 5 shows the percent of Canadians who reported driving within two hours of consuming alcohol in the past 30 days for each year, from 2001 to 2005. Also included is the percent of drinking drivers identified in the National Opinion Poll on Drinking and Driving – a precursor to the Road Safety Monitor – conducted in 1998 (Simpson et al. 1999).

As can be seen, the percent of respondents who reported driving within two hours of consuming alcohol in the past 30 days declined from 1998 through 2003, increased in 2004, and declined again, reaching its lowest level in 2005. Overall, the trend in the percent who report driving after drinking has been downward.
The percent of Canadians who reported driving in the previous 12 months when they thought they were over the legal limit is shown for each year in Figure 6. Again, there has been an overall downward trend in the prevalence of the behaviour, declining from 9.1% in 1998 to 6.7% in 2005. Although data from the most recent year show an increase in the reported incidence of the behaviour, it is not yet possible to determine if this represents a change in the trend or a periodic departure as seen in 2002. The results from the next Road Safety Monitor will shed light on this issue.

![Figure 5: Percent Who Report Driving Within Two Hours of Drinking in Past 30 Days](image)

* Includes only drivers 18 years and over

![Figure 6: Percent Who Report Driving When Over the Limit in Past 12 Months](image)

* Includes only drivers 18 years and over

In general, the trends in the reported frequency of drinking and driving mirror the trends in alcohol involvement in road crashes. In addition to the data in Figure 2, which showed a declining trend in the number of persons killed in crashes involving a drinking driver, other measures of the prevalence of the problem (e.g., proportion of fatally injured...
drivers who were drinking or impaired) show similar positive trends (e.g., Mayhew et al. 2005).

At the same time, it is important to underscore two points. First, the rate of improvement has slowed considerably in recent years. Second, the magnitude of the problem is still substantial.

**Summary of findings on drinking and driving practices**

This survey provides insights into the drinking and driving practices of Canadians and paints a mixed picture containing some encouraging findings and areas where substantial improvements are still needed.

On the encouraging side:

- the vast majority of Canadians (85%) say they have not driven after drinking at any time in the past month;
- among those who say they have driven after drinking, the majority (66%) have done so infrequently;
- the vast majority (more than 93%) say that in the past year, they have not driven when they felt they were over the legal limit;
- trends show that the reported prevalence of driving after drinking and “impaired driving” have been declining.

On the discouraging side:

- about 15% of Canadians – an estimated 3.2 million – say they have driven after drinking sometime in the past month;
- 6.7%, or an estimated 1.5 million drivers, say that during the past year they drove on at least one occasion when they thought they were over the legal limit; and,
- 84% of all the “impaired” driving trips are accounted for by less than 3% of all drivers – these repeat offenders continue to pose a challenge for health and safety officials.
TAKING ACTION AGAINST DRINKING AND DRIVING

Level of support for various measures

Survey respondents were asked to indicate, on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), the extent to which they support a number of approaches to deal with drinking and driving. They were asked to indicate their level of support for several different tactics for dealing with impaired driving – alcohol ignition interlocks for those convicted of a drinking and driving offence, immediate impoundment of the vehicles of drivers who fail a breath test, and more police spot checks. The percent of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each countermeasure option is shown in Figure 7.

Figure 7: Percent Who Agree and Strongly Agree with Countermeasure Options

The mandatory use of alcohol ignition interlock devices for persons convicted of an impaired driving offence was the measure that garnered the greatest level of support. In Canada, interlock programs were introduced in Alberta in 1990 and have since expanded across the country. Currently, most provinces and territories either operate an interlock program or have announced plans to implement one.

Over three-quarters of drivers agree with a requirement for the immediate impoundment of vehicles of drivers who fail a breath alcohol test.

Police spot checks have become a key element of enforcement efforts to deal with the drinking and driving problem. Although most Canadians are familiar with police spot checks, only two-thirds of drivers agree or agree strongly that the police should conduct more spot checks for drinking drivers. Because the question asked drivers if they thought the police should do more spot checks, it should not be interpreted as a weak
endorsement of spot checks in general. Rather, respondents simply are not strongly in favour of the police increasing the number of spot checks.

**The BAC limit for drivers**

In Canada, the maximum allowable BAC for drivers specified in the *Criminal Code* is 80 mg of alcohol per 100 ml of blood (80 mg/dl, or .08%). To supplement this provision, in most provinces (except Quebec) the police can issue immediate short-term suspensions (12 or 24 hours) at the side of the road to drivers who are affected by alcohol or have a BAC that exceeds 50 mg/dl (40 mg/dl in Saskatchewan). Periodically over the past two decades, the issue of lowering the BAC limit for drivers in the *Criminal Code* from its current level of 80 mg/dl to 50 mg/dl has been raised for consideration. The discussion has focussed on the limit stipulated in the *Criminal Code*, because lower thresholds already exist in most regions of Canada.

Respondents to the Road Safety Monitor were asked about their views on the current Criminal Code limit. The line of questioning regarding the Criminal Code limit was consistent with that used previously by Health and Welfare and Transport Canada in their national survey of drinking and driving. Respondents were first asked whether the current blood alcohol limit of 80 mg/dl was appropriate. Just over three-quarters (78%) of drivers agree with this limit. Of the 22% who think it is not appropriate, 77% believe it should be lower; 23% believe it should be higher. In total, this means that about 17% (i.e., 77% of 22%) of Canadian drivers believe the current BAC limit of 80 mg/dl in the *Criminal Code* should be lower. The comparable figure from the Road Safety Monitor in 2002 was 20%.

In contrast to this finding, other surveys have reported quite different results, with the majority of Canadians actually supporting a lower limit. It is evident that on this issue in particular, the way the question is posed has a strong bearing on the outcome. This is likely related to the inherent complexity of the issue itself.

Respondents were also asked about the provincial BAC limits. As stated previously, in most provinces (except Quebec) the police can issue immediate short-term suspensions (12 or 24 hours) at the side of the road to drivers who are affected by alcohol or have a BAC that exceeds 50 mg/dl (40 mg/dl in Saskatchewan). Some jurisdictions require drivers who have received a number of these suspensions to attend an alcohol education or rehabilitation program. Further information about lower BAC limits in Canadian jurisdictions and about a proposed strategy to enhance the effectiveness of current practices can be obtained from the Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators (see, CCMTA 2003, 2005).
Unfortunately, public awareness of these short-term suspensions is not widespread. In provinces that enforce a lower alcohol threshold (i.e., all but Quebec), 61% of respondents either did not know about the lower threshold or said one did not exist. Awareness was greatest in Manitoba and Saskatchewan -- provinces that record such violations on the driver record and require repeat violators to complete an education and/or rehabilitation program. Clearly, if these laws are to have an influence on drinking and driving behaviour, there is a need to ensure that drivers have a level of awareness and knowledge about the law.
Bibliography


