

# ROAD SAFETY MONITOR 2019: DRINKING & DRIVING ATTITUDES AND PRACTICES IN CANADA

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## Introduction

This fact sheet summarizes trends in attitudes about, and practices related to, drinking and driving in Canada based upon data from the Road Safety Monitor (RSM), 2019. The RSM is an annual public opinion survey conducted by the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) under sponsorship from Beer Canada and Desjardins. The survey takes the pulse of the nation on key road safety issues by means of an online<sup>1</sup> survey of a random, representative sample of Canadian drivers.

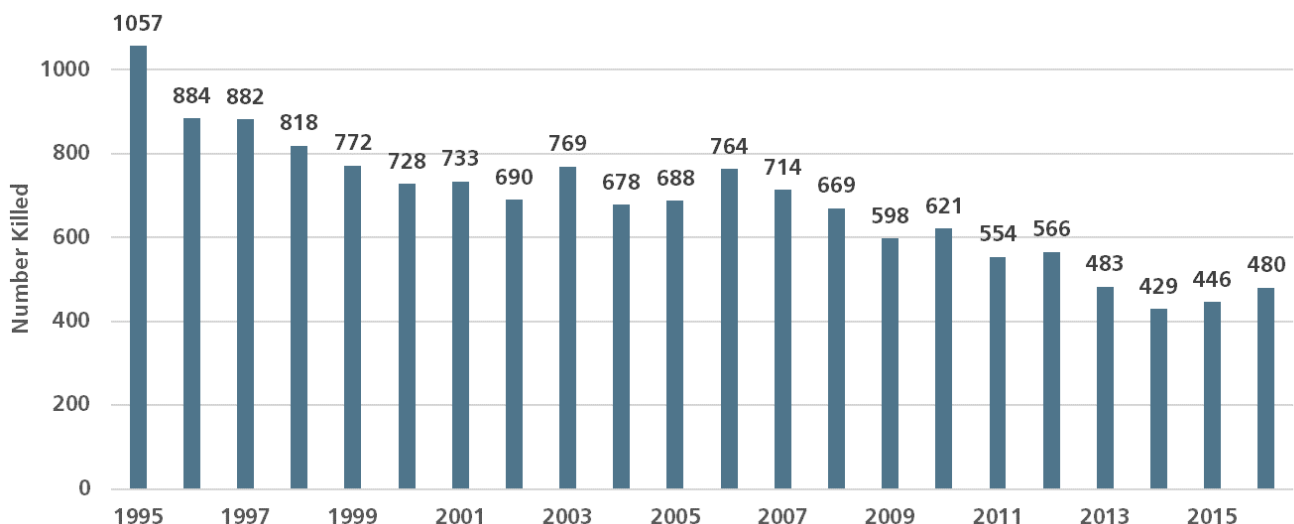
Data from TIRF's National Fatality Database that explore trends in the role of alcohol among fatally

injured victims are also presented. Since fatality data from British Columbia from 2013 to 2016 were not available at the time this fact sheet was prepared, Canadian data presented have been re-calculated to exclude this jurisdiction and make equitable comparisons.

## How many Canadians die in road crashes involving a drinking driver?

In 2016, the most recent year for which data are available, 480 Canadians were killed in a road crash involving a drinking driver. These fatalities occurred within 12 months of crashes on public roadways

**Figure 1: Number of Canadians who died in road crashes involving a drinking driver (excluding BC)**



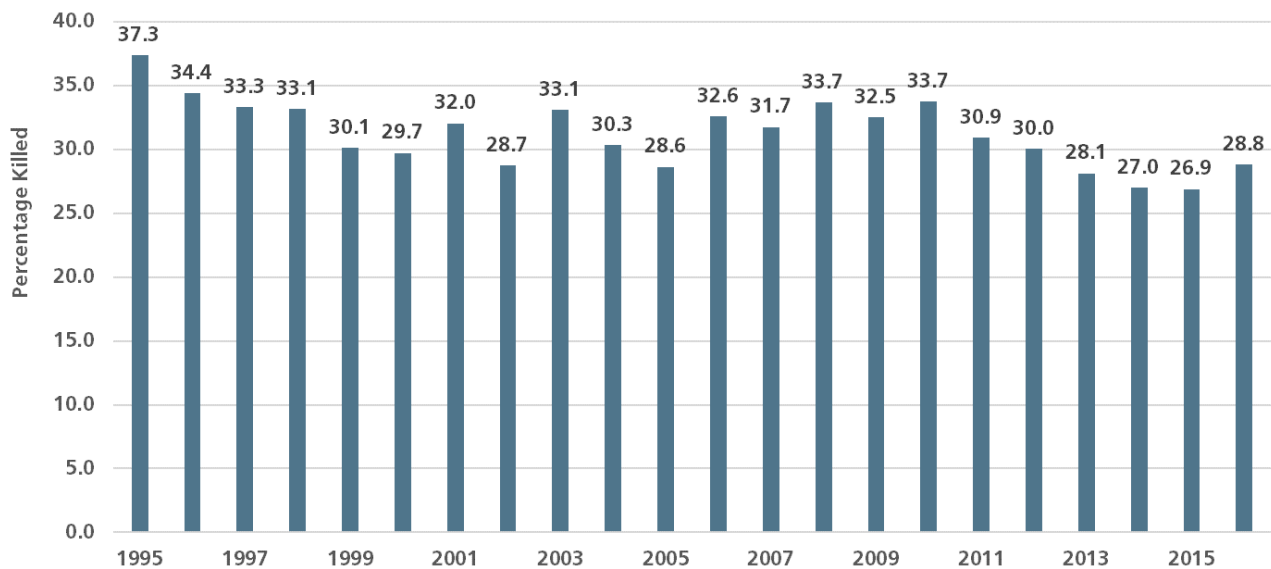
across the country. As illustrated in Figure 1, the number of persons who died in crashes involving a drinking driver between 1995 and 2016 generally decreased (480 compared to 1,057). While this 55% decrease is indicative of progress achieved, two consecutive increases in fatalities in 2015 and 2016 is a concern.

**What percentage of Canadians died in road crashes involving a drinking driver?**

The percentage of persons killed in a crash on a public roadway in Canada involving a drinking driver was 28.8% in 2016. As shown in Figure 2 this percentage declined from a peak of 37.3% in 1995 and has since consistently remained below 35%, although with some fluctuation. From 2010 to 2014, there was a steady decrease in this percentage. The percentage of persons killed in road crashes involving alcohol rose slightly in 2016.



**Figure 2: Percentage of Canadians who died in road crashes involving a drinking driver (excluding BC)**

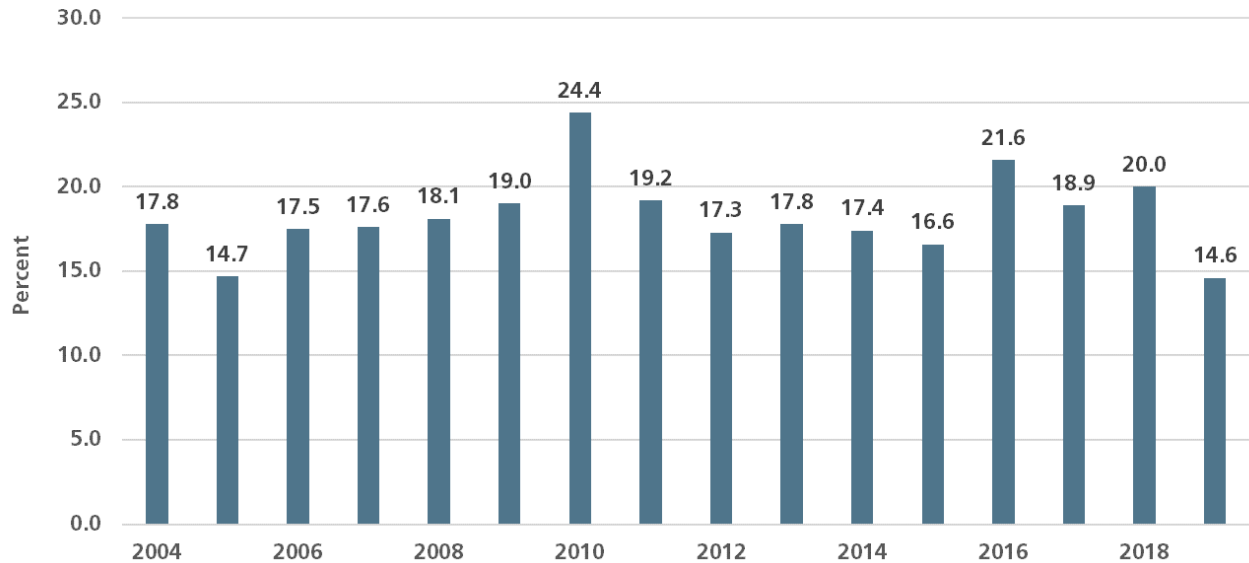


**Has the percentage of drinking drivers on roadways increased?**

When asked about driving after consuming any amount of alcohol in the past 30 days, 14.6% of drivers admitted to doing this in 2019 compared to 20.0% in 2018. It warrants mentioning this includes drinking and driving after consuming lower levels of alcohol and levels below the legal limit or administrative limits (where they exist). There are some clear, albeit only mildly pronounced trends that have emerged over the years as shown in Figure 3.

A piecewise linear regression model was fit to these data post 2005 (excluding the year 2010 which appears to be an outlier). From 2005 through to 2009, there was a statistically significant upward trend in the percentage of respondents who admitted to driving after consuming any amount of alcohol. This was followed between 2011 and 2015 by a downward trend although this trend is not statistically significant. The percentage increased significantly in 2016 followed by a statistically significant downward trend from 2017 to 2019.

**Figure 3: Percentage of drivers who drove after drinking any amount of alcohol**



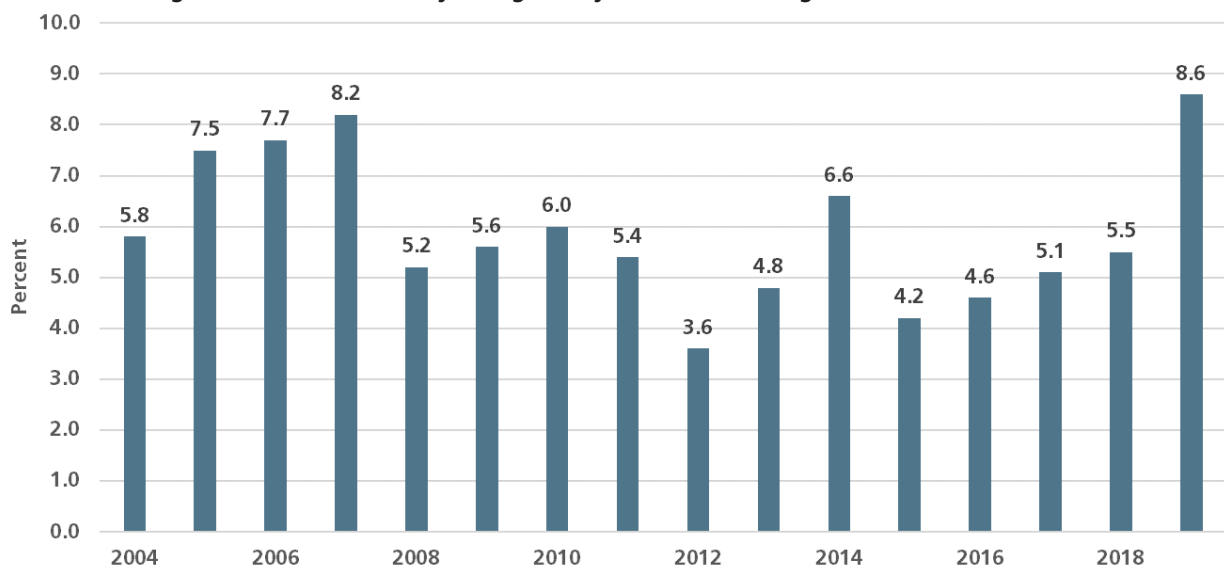
In contrast to the drop in the percentage of drivers who reported driving after drinking any alcohol in the past 30 days, in 2019, 8.6% of respondents admitted they had driven when they thought they were over the legal limit in the past 12 months. This is the highest reported rate from 2004 to present and continues an increasing trend that began in 2015 as shown in Figure 4.

A piecewise linear regression model was fit to these data showing an increasing trend from 2004 to 2007, although the trend is not statistically significant. Between 2008 and 2014 no strong trends were found. Starting in 2015 an increasing trend is apparent which was found to be

statistically significant. These increases correspond with the uptake in the number of fatalities in crashes involving a drinking driver reported in Figure 1 for 2016. Continued monitoring is essential to determine if the increases from 2015 to 2019 will continue or not.

**The number of drivers who reported that they drove when they thought they were over the legal limit has increased since 2015.**

**Figure 4: Percentage that drove when they thought they were over the legal limit**



## Where do drivers do most of their drinking?

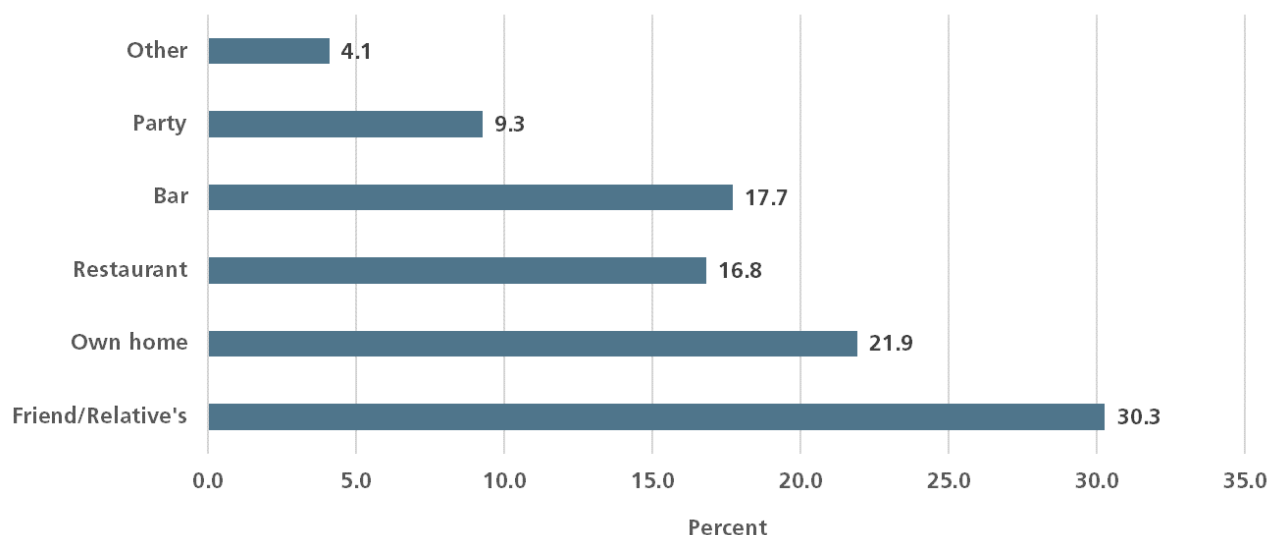
In 2019 and in previous years respondents who admitted to driving when they thought they were over the legal limit were asked where they did most of their drinking prior to driving. The averages for 2017 to 2019 are presented in Figure 5.

The results show that approximately one-third (30.3%) of them reported doing most of their drinking prior to driving at the home of a friend or relative and one-fifth at their own home (21.9%). Those who reported doing most of their drinking in a bar or restaurant accounted for 17.7% and 16.8% respectively, and 34.5% combined. In

contrast, only 9.3% of respondents reported doing most of their drinking at a party.

These results suggest that more persons who drive after drinking do so at the home of friends or family, or either a restaurant or bar, in almost equal measure. Conversely, a smaller proportion of respondents who are potentially driving while over the legal limit do so after drinking at a party or their own home. Key messages to reach and influence these different groups should be tailored accordingly. It also speaks to the need for people to speak up about protecting their loved ones, as well as ensuring people are informed and educated about their responsibilities when hosting parties.

Figure 5: Locations where Canadian drivers reported doing most of their drinking

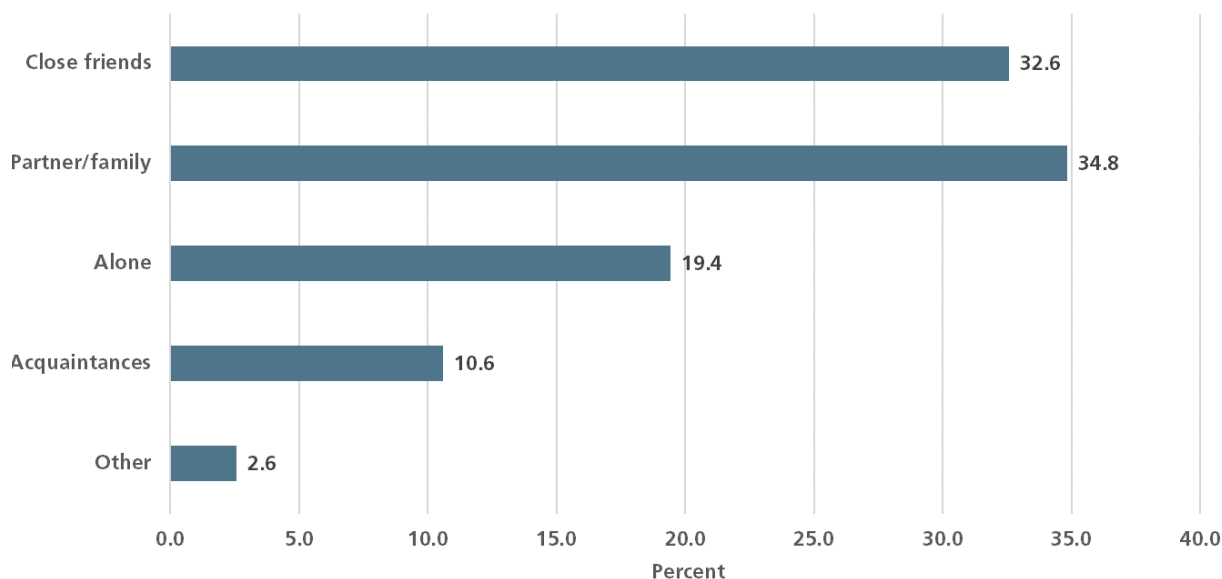


## With whom do drivers do most of their drinking?

In 2019 and in previous years, respondents who reported they drove when they thought they were over the legal limit were also asked with whom they did most of their drinking. The averages for 2017 to 2019 are presented in Figure 6.

The results show that almost one-third of respondents reported doing most of their drinking in the company of close friends (32.6%), and another one-third with a life partner and/or family member (34.8%). One-fifth of respondents (19.4%) reported doing most of their drinking while alone. Only 10.6% reported doing their drinking in the company of acquaintances or colleagues. Similar to the data presented in Figure 5 which illustrated where drivers do most of their drinking, these data show a large percentage of drivers drink in

**Figure 6: Persons with whom Canadian drivers reported doing most of their drinking**



the presence of close friends and family members. These results suggest that a focus on messages and approaches aimed at targeting life partners and/or families as well as close friends may reach and influence the behaviours of the largest portion of drinking drivers. Providing tools to people to learn how to speak up and help them overcome barriers to discussing the issue are needed.

### **Are certain groups of drivers more likely to drive after drinking than other drivers?**

As mentioned earlier, in 2019, 14.6% of respondents admitted to driving after consuming any amount of alcohol in the past 30 days. Male respondents (18.1%) were more likely to drive after drinking than female respondents (11.3%), a statistically significant difference. This corresponds with data on fatally injured drivers where males have historically been far more likely to test positive for alcohol than female drivers (Brown et al. 2017). Among survey respondents in 2019, 8.6% admitted to driving when they thought they were over the legal limit in the past 12 months. A larger percentage of males (11.3%) admitted to this behaviour than females (6.1%), a difference that is also statistically significant.

A comparison of the percentage of respondents who drove after drinking or when they thought they were over the legal limit was performed for four age groups (18-24, 25-44, 45-64 and 65 and older). There was no significant difference between any of these age groups for either of the two indicators.

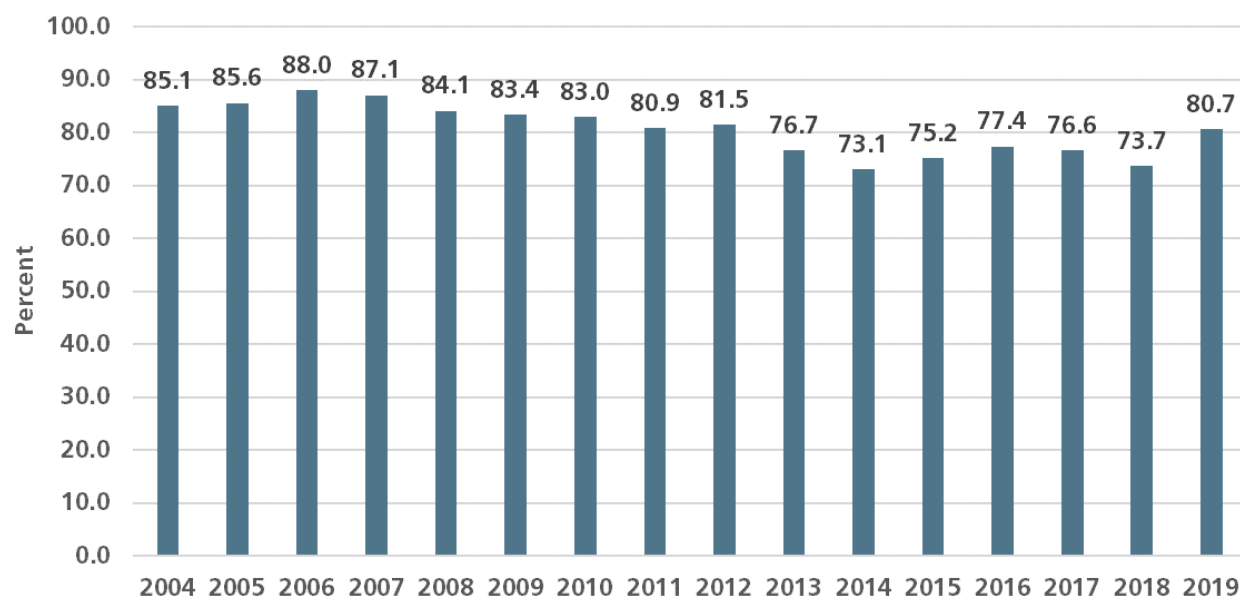
### **Where does the issue of drinking and driving sit on the public agenda?**

Canadians were asked how concerned they were with various public agenda issues. Respondents were asked to rate their concern ranging from 1 (not a problem at all) to 6 (an extremely serious problem); for scoring purposes, respondents were coded as being concerned about an issue if they chose five or six. In 2019, over three-quarters (74.7%) of respondents cited drinking and driving as an issue of concern on the public agenda, the highest percentage of any societal issues that were presented to respondents.

**In 2019, 74.7% of respondents cited drinking and driving as an issue of concern on the public agenda, the highest percentage of any societal issues that were presented to respondents.**

In nine out of 14 years since 2005, when compared to other societal issues such as crime, the economy, and global warming, drinking and driving has been mentioned as the societal issue of greatest concern by Canadian drivers. The price of gas was identified as the societal issue of greatest concern in four years (2011, 2012, 2014, and 2018) while the state of the health care system was mentioned as the top societal issue of concern in 2015.

**Figure 7: Percentage of Canadians who regard drinking drivers as a 'very' or 'extremely' serious problem**



### Is drinking and driving a major road safety issue for Canadians?

Canadians were asked how concerned they were with drinking and driving and other road safety issues (rather than societal issues). Respondents were asked to rate their concern ranging from 1 (not a problem at all) to 6 (an extremely serious problem); for scoring purposes, respondents were coded as being concerned about an issue if they chose five or six. The results for 2004 to 2019 are presented in Figure 7. In 2019, respondents were more likely to cite drivers texting messages on their phones while driving (85.9%) than drinking drivers as a very or extremely serious problem (80.7%). Drinking and driving was cited more often than drivers using cell phones (73.9%), drugged drivers (73.1%), pedestrians or bicyclists behaving unsafely on the road (62.0%), distracted drivers (58.3%) and older drivers impaired by prescription drugs (53.0%).

### What are the attitudes of Canadians towards enforcement?

In 2019, Canadians were asked the degree to which they agreed with statements related to police enforcement of drinking and driving laws. Respondents were asked to rate their agreement ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree); for scoring purposes, respondents were coded as agreeing if they chose five or six. The results revealed that 68.9% of respondents agreed drivers should be required to submit to tests of

physical coordination if suspected of being under the influence of alcohol or drugs. This rate of agreement has declined from 77.6% in 2017, a statistically significant decrease.

Furthermore, 55.7% agreed the police should be allowed to do random breath tests to detect drinking drivers. This rate of agreement is down from 60.9% in 2016, also a statistically significant decrease.

### Conclusion

Based upon recent trends in the number of alcohol-related road deaths and the percentage of total road deaths attributed to drinking drivers, progress has been achieved in Canada to combat drinking and driving. To illustrate, between 1995 and 2016, there was a 55% decrease in the number of Canadians who have died in road crashes involving a drinking driver. However, most recently there have been two consecutive increases in this number from 429 deaths in 2014 to 446 in 2015, and to 480 in 2016. While the 480 deaths recorded in 2016 is still much lower than years prior to 2014, self-reported data on drinking and driving when potentially over the legal limit from this RSM series beyond 2015 indicates that progress achieved in reducing the problem may have stalled.

While there is no perfect correlation between self-reported drinking and driving behaviour on the one hand and alcohol-related crashes on the

other<sup>2</sup>, an increase in alcohol-related crashes might occur following an increase in the proportion of drivers admitting to driving while they thought they were over the legal limit. This is concerning in light of the continued increases in this indicator in 2017, 2018 and particularly 2019 when 8.6% of the Canadian driving population admitted to this behaviour. Continued monitoring is necessary to see which way the trend is going and to inform efforts to reduce this burden on our society.

<sup>1</sup> Prior to 2009 data were collected by means of telephone calls. From 2009 to 2014 data were collected using a combination of telephone calls and online surveys. Since 2014, data have been collected through online surveys only.

<sup>2</sup> A medium to strong, significant correlation coefficient ( $\rho=0.64$ ,  $p=0.02$ ) exists between the number of alcohol-related fatalities from TIRF's National Fatality Database and self-reported drinking and driving when probably over the legal limit from TIRF's RSM. When assessing this correlation's strength, it must be considered that the monitoring periods for both indicators do not completely overlap. To illustrate, 2016 fatalities covers January to December 2016 whereas the 2016 RSM self-reported drinking and driving covers October 2015 to September 2016.

## About the poll

These results are based on the RSM, an annual public opinion poll developed and conducted by TIRF. A total of 1,200 Canadians completed the poll in September and October of 2019. Results can be considered accurate within plus or minus 2.8%, 19 times out of 20. The majority of the questions were answered using a scale from one to six where six indicated high agreement, concern, or support and one indicated low agreement, concern or support. Similar to surveys conducted from 2014 to 2018, all of the respondents completed the 2019 survey online.

## References

Brown, S.W., Vanlaar, W.G.M., & Robertson, R.D. (2017). The Alcohol and Drug-Crash problem in Canada 2014 Report. CCMTA Road Safety Research Report Series. Prepared by Traffic Injury Research Foundation of Canada. Ottawa: Canadian Council of Motor Transport Administrators.

## 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.

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