

Open Letter to the Citizens of Ontario from Ontario Provincial Police Commissioner Julian Fantino

Impaired Driving: Enough is Enough

Once again we are treated to troubling and, in my view, accurate headlines, such as "**more Canadians admit to drinking and driving - number of drunk drivers increasing across Canada**". These statements highlight a serious crime that continues to rack up an unacceptable body count of victims along with terrible carnage, trauma and tragedy ... all preventable if it were not for the conduct of irresponsible drivers.

The recent results of a poll of more than 1000 Canadians should shock us all. According to the Ottawa-based Traffic Injury Research Foundation, the number of Canadians driving drunk has jumped almost 3 percent in three years, up from 5.6% in 2004 to 8.2%. This truly damning statistic is validated in the horrible tragedies police officers, paramedics and medical personnel are called upon to deal with regularly. It is reality for families who are left to deal with the ultimate and unforgiving consequences of the irresponsible actions of drunk drivers, to say nothing of the extraordinary medical costs, loss of productivity and other impacts that society in general is forced to shoulder in the aftermath of such blatant criminal conduct.

Despite my long-tenured police service, I remain incredulous that, with all the knowledge, awareness, education and exposure dedicated to the prevention of this particular crime, Canadians have either tuned out the message or tuned themselves out of the problem in the misguided belief that the consequences of drunk driving will happen only to someone else.

Police officers, especially, know otherwise. They are the people who respond first to the scene of such tragedies. They are the ones who bring the heart wrenching news to families. They are present at the autopsies and of course investigate the circumstances and prepare documents for court or an inquest. All too often, they find their efforts diminished by our justice system's response to drunk drivers.

All this leads me to believe that Canadian society has developed a tolerance for this particular crime, and does not acknowledge its true consequences. We are assertive, as we should be, dealing with gun crimes, gangs and shootings that all too often result in murders. But, whether it is a criminal homicide using a gun or a criminal homicide using a vehicle, the trauma and tragedy of the end result are the same.

A case in point: this year, on Ontario Provincial Police patrolled highways, we have investigated just over 440 traffic fatalities of which more than 70 involved alcohol. Where is the hue and cry? If we had 70 people die as a direct result of a singular, health-caused condition as we experienced with the SARS outbreak in Toronto in 2003, the eyes of the world would be upon us. Not so with traffic fatalities!

I am convinced that the more RIDE (Reduce Impaired Driving Everywhere) checks we do, the more drinking drivers we detect and remove from the roads. For example, so far in this year's OPP Festive RIDE Initiative (November 28 to December 26, 2007), OPP officers have checked 659,456 vehicles, up 2% from the same time last year. The number of 12-hour suspension has increased by 39.7%, up from 657 issued in 2006.

The only positive outcome is a decrease in fatalities, to date, from 35 in 2006 to 27 in 2007. This 22.9% decrease is, I believe, directly related to our increased efforts to detect and apprehend drunk drivers before they either kill themselves or, as is too often the case, kill totally innocent people.

So where do we go from here?

Speaking for the OPP I can confirm that every OPP officer has embraced traffic safety as a core responsibility, one that is manifested in an invigorated and determined effort to detect and apprehend drunk drivers with the same commitment made to the pursuit of those who are intent on murdering people using means and weapons other than motor vehicles.

We do this fully expecting that crown prosecutors and the courts will deal with drunk drivers in a similarly assertive manner ensuring that the consequences, upon conviction, truly reflect the severity of the crime.

We will also need timely political intervention to fix loop holes in current drunk driving laws that have become the hobby horse for defence lawyers to extricate their drunk driving clients from the consequences of their criminal conduct.

With regard to more meaningful consequences, I strongly advocate the impounding of vehicles and the move toward administrative processes that will allow police officers the authority to employ a graduated scale of impoundment, such as three months for a first offence, six months for a second offence, and so on.

In conclusion, the most compelling argument that I believe conveys the serious issue of drunk driving is this undeniable truth: drunk driving is the leading cause of criminal death in Canada – not guns or other weapons but rather, the use of motor vehicle to kill people. An undeniable truth that begs us, collectively as a society, to adopt the attitude that no longer will we will be passive, charitable or forgiving toward drunk drivers. Enough is enough!

J. Fantino, Commissioner
Ontario Provincial Police

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