

Canadians want crackdown on drunk driving: poll

From random breath tests to lowering blood-alcohol limits for drivers, survey shows a willingness to walk the hard line

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Canadians strongly support harsh new measures to crack down on impaired drivers, including random breath tests, vehicle confiscation and lowering the legal blood-alcohol level for drivers, according to a new survey.

The poll, commissioned by Transport Canada and Mothers Against Drunk Driving, found that there was virtual unanimity among those surveyed that impaired driving is the number one road safety concern, far ahead of running red lights, road rage and speeding.

The public opinion poll, to be released today, also found broad acceptance of get-tough measures. For example:

66 per cent think police should be able to conduct random breath tests;



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According to a new survey, 66 per cent of respondents think police should be able to conduct random breath tests. (*Donald Weber/The Globe and Mail*)



83 per cent believe the vehicles of convicted impaired drivers should be fitted with ignition interlocks, devices that ensure a vehicle cannot be started without a breath test;

56 per cent of those polled said that all new cars should be equipped with ignition interlock devices;

89 per cent of respondents say repeat impaired drivers should have their vehicles confiscated;

89 per cent say the acceptable blood-alcohol level for underage drinkers should be zero.

The results of focus groups conducted across Canada found similarly hard-line views, including calls to lower the Criminal Code limit for blood-alcohol concentration to 0.05 (50 milligrams of alcohol per 100 millilitres of blood) from the current level of 0.08.

Focus group participants also described impaired driving as a "completely preventable" problem that could be solved in short order if lawmakers made the issue a priority.

"This is a real wake-up call for our legislators," said Margaret Miller, national president of MADD Canada.

"Of course nobody wants drunk drivers on the road, but this survey shows just how far the public is willing to go to ensure our roads are safe," she said.

Ms. Miller, whose son Bruce, a police officer, was killed in a head-on collision with an impaired driver in May, 2004, said that, like her, many members of the public "seem to be sick and tired of seeing all the carnage on our roads."

In Canada, about 3,000 people a year are killed in motor vehicle crashes, and 350,000 are injured. MADD Canada estimates that close to 40 per cent of the fatal crashes involve impaired drivers.

Transport Canada, in its strategic plan titled Road Safety Vision 2010, has set a target of reducing the number of fatalities and serious injuries involving impaired drivers by 40 per cent between 2008 and 2010 compared to figures from a decade earlier.

Andrew Murie, CEO of MADD Canada, said that, to date, Transport Canada "is failing miserably on its Vision 2010 goals."

He said that in the past five years, efforts to reduce impaired driving have stalled and he hopes the new survey will help kick-start a new round of government action.

Mr. Murie said a large part of the problem is that federal and provincial governments have not kept pace with other countries in using new technologies and other countermeasures.

"Random breath testing happens all over Europe," he said.

Similarly, Mr. Murie noted that the technology exists to equip all cars with ignition interlock devices at a minimal cost, and that the poll showed strong support for such an approach. He said that, like seat belts and infant car seats, the devices will likely become standard in the years to come.

The MADD CEO said that the oft-cited concern that cracking down on impaired driving will violate civil liberties is unfounded.

The poll, conducted by Ekos Canada, involved 1,514 respondents. The margin of error is 2.5 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. The focus groups, conducted in Vancouver, Calgary, Montreal and Toronto, involved a total of 120 participants.

Survey results are available at Madd.ca.

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