

Safety dilemma of wide-open spaces: too much room to take risks

No magic bullet for improving Manitobans' driving behaviour

Last week I was discussing a presentation I had given that dealt with the “relative risk” or odds of getting into a serious collision. It outlined that in grid locked traffic it's not uncommon for vehicles to get too close and—bam—another fender bender!

But, serious crashes, the ones that make the evening news, are relatively uncommon in heavy traffic, simply because there isn't room to make the bad decisions that cause them.

However, a recent study revealed that when traffic is light, the number of serious and fatal accidents per number of vehicles on the road went way up, as did the average cost per insurance claim. Drivers had the room to make big mistakes.

Those big mistakes are rising here in Manitoba. There were about 27,000 crashes reported to police in both 1997 and 1998. However, 400 more people were reported injured in 1998 than in the previous year.



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Why is our “relative risk” so high? Why are we first in Canada for injuries per 10,000 vehicles, and in third place for fatalities per 10,000 vehicles? What kind of road safety would fix the problem? Well, that depends on what you think road safety is.

You may believe that the trick to lowering our death and injury rates is through the police and their enforcement initiatives. It's a proven fact—getting caught, or the fear of getting caught, changes driver behaviour.

Others are convinced the real value in road safety is in rethinking how we design our roads and vehicles. This involves designing roads so drivers

can move safely, not just quickly. It's cars with airbag sensors and side impact beams.

In fact, some engineering proponents suggest the only way to reduce crashes, injuries and deaths is to “take the driver out of the equation.” This goes beyond engineering safer roads and cars right to the space-age vision of cars that drive themselves. San Diego recently piloted an “auto highway” where magnets and radar screens in specially modified vehicles literally take over the wheel from the driver on a certain stretch of the freeway.

Here in Manitoba, we have focused our road safety efforts on education. In fact, MPI's High School Driver Ed program is one of the most comprehensive driver education programs available anywhere. And, the government is looking at graduated driver licensing as another way of making our roads safer. MPI also supports a wealth of other public

education initiatives—like The Older, Wiser Driver handbook and the Children's Traffic Safety Club—that reach Manitobans in other age groups.

Obviously, there is no “silver bullet,” as crashes still occur. It's the “why” that I'm wrestling with, both from a statistical and personal perspective.

With accident info coming in from many sources—MPI claims adjusters, the police, emergency services and the provincial medical examiner's office—it's an ongoing challenge to gather and cross-reference information to help everyone interested in safety better understand the causes and the effect of behaviour on our streets and roads. This information goes a long way to helping us find out what's going on out there.

My personal perspective? I believe that crash statistics mirror driver attitude. For some reason, more drivers are taking more risks—driving faster, driving with aggression, driving

without anything even resembling care and attention. Why? Well, the jury is still out. Are more people feeling “invulnerable” because they are driving SUVs and similar large vehicles? Are they feeling “safe” because they don't see a police officer on every corner? No one can say with absolute certainty, but what we can say is that they are paying for their poor behaviour behind the wheel.

No matter what your perspective on what “road safety” is, I think we can all agree driver behaviour is an extremely important piece. Please think about that next time you turn over the engine.

That's it for this week. Until next week, be **RoadWise**.

Paul Allen is Road Safety Manager for Manitoba Public Insurance. He would like to hear from you. His e-mail address is pallen@mpi.mb.ca and his mailing address is Room 824, 234 Donald Street, Box 6300, Winnipeg, MB R3C 4A4.