



Injuries in review

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Injuries are the leading cause of death for Canadians up to the age of 44, and the fourth leading cause of death

for those of all ages. Injury is also the leading cause of hospitalization for Canadians aged 10-24 years. And when injuries are not fatal, they can still lead to impairments and disabilities such as blindness, spinal cord injury and intellectual deficit due to brain injury. There is an impact on not only the injured, but also on their families and society. That makes Injuries a major public health challenge.

The Public Health Agency of Canada reported on injuries in its 2012 report that spotlighted injuries from road and transport safety. Their data is detailed and thorough, examining the extent of injury causing death and hospitalization. The report highlights unintentional and road or transport-related injuries among children, youth, and young adults up to 24 years of age.

While statistics show an important decline in the rates of motor vehicle fatalities and injuries over the past three decades, these incidents remain one of the leading threats to the health of Canada's children youth and young adults.

The overall mortality rate from leading injury causes declined between 1979 and 2007, including motor vehicle traffic collisions. Child restraints like car seats and boosters along with seatbelts helped this as they made road travel safer. Evidence shows that unrestrained occupants of light duty vehicles involved in collisions have a three times greater likelihood of being injured and 16 times greater likelihood of fatal injury, as compared to restrained occupants.

Impaired driving is one area where no significant improvement has occurred. While most often associated with alcohol consumption, impaired driving can be caused by drug use (both legal and not), distraction and other factors that impair a driver's judgment. In 2009, 38% of motor vehicle fatalities involved alcohol use.

Over the past 40 years, a number of public health measures have mitigated the rates of transport-related death and injury. An early measure, coming in 1971, was the requirement for all new vehicles to be equipped with seatbelts; by 1976 provinces were making their use mandatory. In 1985 the Criminal Code was amended to increase penalties for impaired drivers. In 1990, daytime running lights mandated for all new vehicles. A proven effective safety measure for new drivers, graduated licensing, was introduced in most Canadian jurisdictions between 1994 and 2005. And in 2010, BC banned the use of hand-held cell phone use while driving.

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Each of these measures provided a public health response to

injuries. That is, measures which are globally applied to save lives and reduce injuries. The benefits though not targeted at individuals, benefit people and communities as a whole.

Most trends in road safety are positive, though some are persistent and not declining. The annual proportion of alcohol-related motor vehicle fatalities has not declined significantly since the 1990s. Driver distraction, notably related to use of cell phones and other interactive electronic devices, is a new risk that has emerged, one that disproportionately affects young drivers. Only sustained efforts on road safety will save lives and reduce the numbers of injuries.