

COMMUNITY: People today seem to focus more on their rights than their responsibilities

An assault on society

Rage is the product of life in the fast lane where everyone wants to even the score

BY LISA QUEEN
Staff Writer

Road rage, air rage, neighbour rage — rage seems to be everywhere these days, with people flying off the handle at the slightest provocation.

• A Pefferlaw man suffered a broken jaw when he was savagely beaten in a case of campground rage at Sibbald Point provincial park last week. A second victim suffered cuts and bruises.

• Just four days earlier, a Markham man was left bleeding on Hwy. 404 near Aurora Road after three men attacked him in what police are calling one of the worst cases of road rage in Ontario.

• Last Sunday, a Scarborough father was shot in the leg in a bizarre case of drive-through rage when he took his family for ice cream cones at McDonald's in the Kingston Road-Lawrence Avenue area.

"We've seen a large increase in reports and it seems to be escalating," said Staff Sgt. Mark Wolfe, detachment commander of Aurora OPP for the past year.

"It's almost to the point in the last month or so, it's almost out of control in this area. From a policing point of view, I'm almost at my wit's end about what to do about it."

Road rage has become so ugly on local highways, Wolfe restructured the OPP's aggressive driving team late last year.

Instead of having officers merely point radar guns at speeders, he now has an unmarked police car and motorcycles operating in a "stealth mode" on provincial highways, catching drivers who weave in and out of traffic, tailgate or commit other aggressive acts.

This summer, Wolfe also launched an investigative team to follow up on road rage cases.

Despite the force's efforts, Wolfe said officers are hard-pressed to keep a lid on the problem.

"I know there has been a huge increase in physical attacks and highway stalking," he said. "I feel like I'm holding a dike and as soon as I get one hole plugged, another one opens."

Wolfe suspects that life in the fast lane — drivers trying to win imaginary races on the highway — is to blame for some incidents.



PHOTO/CELIA BRONKHORST

OPP Staff-Sgt. Mark Wolfe sees more and more road rage on York Region highways. The growing number of physical attacks and aggressive acts forced him to launch a stealth patrol to cruise the freeways and to form a team to follow up on rage cases.

"Society is like a pinball game in an arcade. Even the family car is sporty. You feel like you're in an arcade. It's all win, win, win," he said.

While driving home from work Monday, another driver tried to engage Wolfe in a confrontation that easily could have ended in violence if he had taken the bait.

"We could have ended up duking it out on the side of the road. It starts out with 'I have to be in front of you,'" he said.

"In 13 years of policing, I have seen a huge increase in incidents."

But rage isn't confined to the open highway.

Knight isn't sure what causes such outbursts, but they're probably an indication the offender has problems with anger and stress in other areas of his life.

He noted that, three weeks ago, he was stalked for several kilometres by a driver he mistakenly cut off.

Although Knight said most incidents of rage — especially those that end in violence — involve men, women are guilty of engaging in wars of words or gestures.

"Women may scream or yell, but it doesn't get to the point of violence," he said.

"I don't know what it is about men that they feel they have to get even or somebody has to pay or get hurt to even the score."

Men who have a history of anger problems, especially if they are combined with substance abuse issues, can go ballistic when faced with the increasing pressures of daily life.

"You've got a Molotov cocktail," Knight said. "Another category is the normal guy who has a build-up of frustration."

Knight described rage as anger gone berserk.

"Rage is something where you're not listening, you've lost control. Only something like a police officer or several cruisers tracking you down is going to make a difference," he said.

"We live in a society that probably lives in the fast lane. You're striving to get ahead. Getting help for a lot of people is still frowned on. Families are often so fractured and people don't have anyone to turn to. People can feel their life is out of control."

Knight said he also suspects people are being taught more about their rights than their responsibilities these days.

"Maybe it's an attitude of entitlement. If someone dares infringe on those rights — even mistakenly, even if it's a small infraction — some people believe they are entitled to react inappropriately to regain the upper hand."

"Perpetrators of road rage feel they are being taken advantage of. It's a way of getting even or expressing themselves," Knight said.

"They're angry about not just that (what's happening on the road at the time) but a whole pile of things. It's like sitting on a powder keg."

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• Jack Knight, psychotherapist

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