Fatalities down elsewhere in Canada

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"Fatalities have been reduced substantially in Ontario," he said, adding the province has the second best record in North America in reducing traffic deaths.

Nationally, the picture is just as good. According to a December 2001 report by the Canada Safety Council's Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, our nation has the best traffic safety record over the past 20 years.

Traffic fatalities in Canada dropped 47 per cent between 1980 and 2000, despite a 48-per-cent increase in the number of vehicles.

But if the current rate in York Region continues, the number of people killed on local roads this year could approach 40, well above the 29 deaths recorded in each of the past two years and close to the five-year high of 42 recorded in 1999.

Sgt. Tom Carrique of the York Regional Police traffic bureau can't explain the increase but does offer a possibility.

"(York Region's population) is growing by 40,000 a year, but they are all operating vehicles on the same (highway) infrastructure," he said. "If we weren't doing that enforcement, what would the rate be now?"

To some extent, bad luck also plays a part.

"The difference between an injury accident and a fatal accident is a matter of inches," Sgt. Carrique said.

Chief Robert Middaugh had his own take on the numbers.

"Inattentive driving would seem to be coming to the fore," he said.

But he cautioned against reacting too quickly to the statistics.

"We could go the next four months without any fatalities at all," he said.

"It is a concern to us," Chief Middaugh continued. "We're analyzing the problem to see if there are more or different actions we can take."

York's increased fatality rate comes despite the high-profile introduction this year of police programs designed to make the roads safer.

The major weapon being used is the Save-a-Life: One Vision, One Goal safety program, which began with a zero-tolerance traffic blitz on Hwy. 7 in January. Before the blitz, police said, only 17 per cent of drivers on the highway were complying with the speed limit.

Police have since mounted mini-blitzes around the region and designated some highway sections for aircraft patrol. Later this year, police will begin extra enforcement in the region's community safety zones and in rural communities.

"Enforcement alone can't control fatalities," Sgt. Carrique said. "But every traffic stop we make potentially saves a life. We can't rid the roads of all fatal collisions, but we obviously hope over time, through enforcement, education and (road) engineering, we will have an impact."

Traffic enforcement is a priority with the police. By the end of March, under the Save-A-Life campaign, York police issued 19,070 tickets for provincial offences, compared with 15,796 in the same period last year.

"Hopefully, at the end of the day, we do save a life," Sgt. Carrique said. "Anytime we have a fatality, it's discouraging because they're almost always preventable. The vast majority have a direct connection to the non-use of seat-belts."

Mr. Killian said the overall reduction of traffic deaths in Ontario results from education, faster response times in taking accident victims to hospitals and new vehicles with new technologies such as air bags.

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- Sgt. Tom Carrique of the York Regional Police traffic bureau

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"Reflections" by Patricia

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