

Blitz is on – but distracted driving charges down in region

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At a time when police forces around the GTA are boosting ticketing for distracted driving — some by more than 1,300 per cent — York Regional Police has issued fewer tickets for what it has been labelling the “new drunk driving”.

Data obtained by yorkregion.com shows the number of tickets issued for the charge of driving while using a handheld device fell from 5,330 in 2011 to 2,985 in 2013.

That information comes as the force teams up with Toronto police and CAA this week to launch a six-week distracted driving campaign.

Elsewhere in the GTA, police forces have dramatically stepped up efforts, as studies show the extent of the practice and just how dangerous it can be.

Peel officers, for example, laid the charge 1,316 per cent more in 2013 than it did in 2011 — 5,780, up from 408.

Meanwhile, Durham police has more than doubled its enforcement during the same time period, from 1,035 in 2011 to 2,893 in 2013.

Earlier this year, Norm Deneault, a Halton officer who was hit by a distracted driver, made headlines after issuing his 3,000th distracted driving ticket in the region.

Staff Sgt. Dave Mitchell, from York Regional Police's traffic unit, said part of the decrease in tickets can be attributed to the way the courts were interpreting distracted driving laws.

He referred to a series of court decisions in 2012 that meant officers needed to prove that phones were on and functioning to find

drivers guilty of distracted driving.

Only a year later, that decision was overturned when a higher court said simply holding a phone was enough for a ticket.

“The mindset of frontline officers was a wait-and-see approach, like they were in legal limbo,” he said.

‘NEW DRUNK DRIVING’

“I can pretty much guarantee that in 2013/2014 you'll see a marked increase in terms of enforcement; it's already happening,” he said, citing 2014 numbers that have already reached 2,815.

Mitchell dismissed any suggestion that the prevalence of talking or texting while driving is actually falling, noting, during the launch of the blitz Tuesday, he witnessed officers ticket 41 people on Steeles Avenue, near Hwy. 404, in a matter of hours.

“I was in awe of what I was seeing,” he said. “We had been on the radio and television all day telling people we were doing the blitz, too.”

Maybe it shouldn't have come as such a surprise, though.

A recent study, surveying 100,000 teenagers, shows more than one third of all grade 10 and 11 licensed drivers have engaged in texting while driving. The number rises to 46 per cent of licensed drivers in Grade 12.

York University's psychology professor David Wisenthal, who studies and teaches issues surrounding road user behaviour and traffic safety, said it appears the police in York have altered their focus on distracted driving.

“I'm surprised they're not going after it more vigorously,” he said. “Driving is very complex and you have to be alert. If you are distracted

or paying attention to something else ... it should be a high priority.

“I am certainly not seeing it decrease,” he said. “As a matter of fact, I've never seen a woman in a Cadillac SUV not on the phone. I think (police) should be focusing on it and I wouldn't close my eyes to it.”

The York police department maintains that texting while driving is similar in potential danger to driving with a .125 blood alcohol level, which is above the legal limit.

Distracted driving charges were increased to \$280 in March and there is a push to hike the penalty to \$1,000 and three demerit points.

According to the Ministry of the Attorney General, 15,439 charges have been laid by York police since 2010 and there have been more than 11,000 convictions.

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