

The BACs of Dead, Alcohol-Positive Drivers in Canada from 1987 to 1999: What Do The Numbers Tell Us?

The number of dead drivers who tested positive for alcohol has fallen sharply from 1987 to 1999. The decline has been relatively steady with some recent exceptions.

The percentage of dead drivers in each BAC range has remained extremely stable over the thirteen-year period. Contrary to what some commentators have suggested, there has been no dramatic increase or, for that matter, any increase in the percentage of dead drivers in the highest BAC range (>0.15% BAC). The so-called “hard-core drinking driver” problem in Canada has remained remarkably consistent over this period, making up a low of 59% to a high of 63% of the total deaths.

The measures taken to reduce impaired driving appear to have had a similar impact across all of the BAC ranges. Again, contrary to what has been suggested, there is no evidence that drivers in the highest BAC range are immune to drinking and driving countermeasures. The numbers suggest that general countermeasures, such as lowering the *Criminal Code* BAC limit, will likely have similar effects across the BAC ranges.

In summary, the numbers do not support the view that high BAC drivers are a new problem or a problem that is getting worse in Canada. Nor do the numbers suggest that general countermeasures will be ineffective in reducing alcohol-related crash fatalities among such drivers.

The BACs of Dead, Alcohol-Positive Drivers in Canada: 1987-1999*

Year	Total No. of Drivers Tested**	The Number and Percentage () of Drivers with BACs at:		
		0.01% - 0.08%	0.081% - 0.150%	> 0.151%
1987	914	172 (19%)	191 (21%)	551 (60%)
1988	909	186 (20%)	184 (20%)	539 (59%)
1989	870	143 (16%)	206 (24%)	521 (60%)
1990	787	155 (20%)	159 (20%)	483 (60%)
1991	785	127 (16%)	168 (21%)	490 (62%)
1992	762	126 (17%)	165 (22%)	471 (62%)
1993	749	115 (15%)	162 (22%)	472 (63%)
1994	703	127 (18%)	143 (20%)	433 (62%)
1995	702	129 (18%)	143 (20%)	430 (62%)
1996	598	97 (16%)	133 (22%)	368 (62%)
1997	576	108 (19%)	122 (21%)	346 (60%)
1998	559	90 (16%)	136 (24%)	333 (60%)
1999	499	90 (18%)	110 (22%)	299 (60%)

*This chart is based on data provided by Transport Canada and the Traffic Injury Research Foundation. We wish to thank Mr. P. Boase for his assistance in obtaining the data.

**Note that the figures exclude operators of bicycles, snowmobiles, farm tractors and other non-highway vehicles.

Although progress has been made, Canada lags far behind the world leaders in traffic safety in terms of the percentage of dead drivers who are legally impaired. Moreover, many of these countries have far higher rates of per capita alcohol consumption than Canada and define impairment more broadly in terms of having a BAC of 0.05% or higher. For example, Transport Canada recently reported that in Germany, which has a per capita alcohol consumption rate 70% higher than Canada, only 11% of the dead drivers were legally impaired, as defined by having a BAC above 0.05%. In contrast, 32% of Canada’s dead drivers were legally impaired, as defined by having a BAC above 0.08%.