

Drunk driving toll nears homicide losses

By **MICHAEL PLATT**

Last Updated: 3rd December 2009, 4:16am

One lethal crime triggers public fear and an arsenal of police time and resources; the other lethal crime earns a shrug and perhaps a poster campaign, saying please behave.

Yet the number of corpses wheeled into Alberta's morgues each year are a virtual match: 110 victims of homicide and 107 people killed through impaired driving.

Murder horrifies the masses; drunk-driving is a mild bother, unless it's your loved one in the coffin.

Never mind that innocent Albertans are far more likely to be killed by drunks in cars, than gun-welding gang members or marauding psychopaths stalking the dark streets.

Fear motivates more than facts and when it comes to police attention and manpower, drunk driving is a very poor cousin to murder and organized crime.

It might explain why Alberta has once again slipped in the annual ranking of provinces in the fight against drunk driving.

Released by Mothers Against Drunk Driving yesterday, the report shows Alberta has fallen from fourth to sixth in the 2009 cross-country survey, with a grade of B minus.

Ontario ranked first among all provinces and territories with an A-minus, earned for lowering the maximum allowable blood alcohol content (BAC) from 0.08% to 0.05 this year.

Alberta's low B may not sound too bad, until you consider this province had the highest death rate in the country.

That figure upsets MADD spokeswoman Louise Knox.

"We've met with government officials here and our frustration is there seems to be very little interest in taking the province to the next level," said Knox.

Knox, like many with a keen interest in stringent impaired driving laws, became an advocate in the worst way possible: In 1999, her 16-year-old son Mike was killed in St. Paul when a drunk driver slammed into his vehicle.

She says Alberta once led the country in anti-drunk driving legislation, with ignition locks for convicted drunks, but has lost ground through government apathy and a lack of resources.

"That's the sad state of our province right now -- it's the leading province for alcohol-related deaths," said Knox.

"As much as they keep saying it's a great and wonderful place to live, it's also the place where you're most likely to die from an alcohol-related crash."

According to the Alberta Motor Association, impaired driving offences in Alberta increased 14% in 2008, while 22% of drivers involved in fatal crashes had consumed alcohol.

Drunk driving is on a steady pace in Calgary as well, according to police statistics.

In the first nine months of 2007, police arrested 2,584 impaired drivers, while the same time-frame in 2008 resulted in 2,821 people in handcuffs. This year, they've arrested 2,715.

It's not that Calgary's Police Service isn't concerned about drunk driving, it's just there aren't enough officers devoted to catching drunks.

The city's one Check Stop unit is on the streets year-round, unlike most cities, and this Christmas season, daytime checks are again in the cards. Hallelujah.

But one Check Stop for a city of one-million people is clearly not enough, considering the vast resources poured into organized crime and downtown beat patrols, all in the name of safety.

If keeping Calgarians safe is the priority, more officers conducting random sobriety checks is a must.

Aldermen such as Diane Colley-Urquhart and John Mar have in the past spoken to increasing the number of Check Stops on the street, but the unit hasn't grown, while the number of drunk drivers has.

On a provincial level, politicians might get more votes fighting gang crime and drug trafficking, but just as many people are killed because drunks believe they can get away with it.

MADD wants zero tolerance for young drivers caught drinking, and the automatic one-day suspension for blood alcohol levels over 0.05% lengthened to a week.

The group also wants Alberta to require mandatory ignition interlocks for all first-time offenders.

Good ideas.

But first, Alberta needs a government which takes drunk driving as seriously as murder.

MICHAEL.PLATT@SUNMEDIA.CA