

Stronger drunk driving laws lead to safer roads, study finds

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Changes to British Columbia's laws against driving while impaired have reduced fatal crashes as well as ambulance calls and hospital admissions resulting from motor vehicle crashes, a new University of British Columbia study finds.

Researchers concluded that harsher penalties for impaired driving and speeding instituted by the B.C. government in September 2010 reduced crashes related to drinking and driving.

Automobile crashes declined 21 per cent, crash-related hospital admissions dropped 8 per cent and crash-related ambulance calls fell by 7.2 per cent. Based on those statistics, there were an estimated 84 fewer fatal crashes, 308 fewer hospital admissions and 2,553 fewer ambulance calls for road trauma each year.

"Our findings add to the growing evidence that the new laws, although controversial to some, were associated with marked improvements in road safety," said lead author Jeffrey Brubacher, associate professor of Emergency Medicine at UBC, researcher with Vancouver Coastal Health Research Institute and a VCH Emergency Department physician. "We hope that other jurisdictions will follow B.C.'s lead in implementing similar laws designed to deter dangerous driving."

Under the changes B.C. imposed in 2010, first-time offenders with a blood alcohol content (BAC) of .05 per cent to .08 per cent will have their driver's licence suspended for three days, pay a \$600 fine and, at

police discretion, have their vehicle impounded for three days. Drivers with a BAC higher than .08 per cent face even stiffer penalties.

Previous research by Dr. Brubacher and colleagues found a 40 per cent decrease in alcohol-related fatal crashes and a 23 per cent decrease in alcohol-related injury collisions in the year after the changes took effect.

Drawing on that previous research, the recent study asserts that the changes to the law and accompanying enforcement and media coverage – and not other factors – were responsible for the reduced rate of fatal crashes, [hospital admissions](#) and ambulance calls.

Published online Aug. 14 in the *American Journal of Public Health*, the study notes that there was a drop in fatal crashes in B.C., but there was no decline in [fatal crashes](#) in Washington state or Saskatchewan, where laws remained constant during the study period. There was a significant drop in Alberta, but the researchers attribute that to a "spillover" effect of media coverage, and the fact that Alberta began debating and then approved changes similar to B.C.'s during the study period.

Provided by University of British Columbia

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