



IRISH MEDICAL  
ORGANISATION  
Ceardchumann Dochtúirí na hÉireann

# IMO Position Paper on Road Safety

March 2005

Irish Medical Organisation,  
10 Fitzwilliam Place, Dublin 2.  
tel: (01) 676 7273  
fax: (01) 661 2758  
e-mail: [imo@imo.ie](mailto:imo@imo.ie)  
website: [www.imo.ie](http://www.imo.ie)

## Why Is Road Safety a Problem? The Facts and Figures

It is universally accepted that road safety is a world wide problem. The World Bank estimates that road accidents could become the third biggest cause of mortality by the year 2020 unless there is some radical new thinking about the problem and a fundamental change in attitude.

At the launch of the European Road Safety Charter in January 2004, it was stated that in spite of progress made in road safety the overall situation is still a disaster - from the human, social and economic points of view. €15 has now more than 40,000 fatalities and 1.7 million persons injured every year in road accidents, at a total cost estimated at 160 billion year. The situation is even worse in accession Countries (about 12,000 more fatalities yearly).

It is now well known that some categories of road users or population groups are particularly at risk; in the EU these include

- young persons between 15 and 24 year of age (10,000 fatalities / year)
- pedestrians (7,000 fatalities)
- motor-cyclists and moped users (6,000 fatalities)
- cyclists (1,800 fatalities)

The unacceptable behaviour of road users is the first cause of mortality: excessive speed (15,000 fatalities), consumption of alcohol or drugs, fatigue (10,000 fatalities), non-wearing of seat belts or of protective helmets (7,000 fatalities).

## Latest Figures on Road Accidents for Ireland, 2002

Turning to Ireland, the latest official figures available are for the number of persons killed and injured on Irish roads in 2002. In 2002, 376 people were fatally injured in 346 separate accidents. According to the National Roads Authority, of those killed 200 were car users, 86 were pedestrians, 44 were motorcyclists, 18 were bicyclists and 28 were classified as other road users. The number of persons seriously injured was 9,206 in a total of 6,279 accidents.

### The Alarming Facts:

- The CSO calculated that deaths from road traffic accidents were the biggest cause of death in the 15-24 age group at 29% in 2002.
- The average risk value of being killed in a road accident in Ireland is 10.7 persons for every 100,000 population. However, this figure conceals a relatively high risk value for persons in the 15-24 age group of 20.1 persons per 100,000. The corresponding UK figure is 12.4.
- Of all road traffic accident deaths in 2002, three quarters were male and one-quarter female.
- 72% of fatal accidents occurred on rural roads in 2002
- The largest percentage of overall fatalities, 37%, occurred on Sundays and Mondays, July was the worst month and 32% of all fatal accidents occurred between the hours of 9pm and 3am.
- While fatalities fell by 9% on 2001 figures (35 fatalities), most of that reduction occurred post-introduction of the new Penalty Points system related to speeding offences on October 31st 2002.
- In 2002, single vehicle accidents accounted for 30% of fatal accidents. The main cause of this type of accident is excessive speed and/or drink-driving.
- Head on collisions account for 28% of fatal accidents and 20% of injury accidents.
- Pedestrian accidents account for 25% of fatal accidents and 17% of injuries.
- Single vehicle, head on and pedestrian accidents account for a greater proportion of fatal accidents than injury accidents which suggests that on average these types of accident are more severe than at angle, rear-end or other accident types which account for only 17% of fatal accidents.

## Road Safety Policy in Ireland

The EU Road Safety Programme states that 'the number of fatal casualties is still the clearest parameter by which to measure the development of the road safety situation for large populations'<sup>1</sup>

There are a number of crucial pieces of legislation and policy initiatives undertaken by government in recent years that have contributed to reducing the overall number of fatalities on Irish Roads.

One of the key initiatives attributed with the success in progressing the situation in Ireland is the Government's Road Safety Strategy, *The Road to Safety, 1998-2002*. Over the three years of the strategy, the primary target of the strategy was to reduce the absolute levels of road accident fatalities and serious injuries by 20% on their 1997 levels by 2002. The three key action areas in which targets were set were 1) speeding; 2) seat belt wearing and 3) alcohol. The strategy aimed to focus the efforts of implementing agencies on common and coordinated priorities and sets demanding targets for road safety. It called for intensified and sustained efforts from relevant agencies and sought to rally greater public and political support for road safety, positioning Ireland to participate more effectively in the EU's Road Safety Programme.

In 1999 the National Safety Council commissioned Dr Peter Bacon, to produce a cost benefit analysis on the key areas contained in the Government Strategy.<sup>1</sup> The report which was published in 1999 estimated that the total economic benefit of achieving the targets set out in the strategy was about IR£536 million (€680.7 million) in the period 1998-2002. However, estimates of costs range between €0.68 billion and €1.5 billion. The National Roads Authority put the estimate costs of road accidents at €0.73 billion.<sup>2</sup>

Another crucial development in the drive to reduce road accidents was the enactment of the Road Traffic Act in 2002. This piece of legislation was enacted primarily for the introduction of the penalty points system. The potential of this system to reduce the level of carnage on our roads was illustrated in the first two months after the introduction of penalty points for speeding on 31st October 2002 when most of the reduction in fatalities on the previous year occurred; the number of road deaths for the 10 month period between November 1st 2002 (when penalty points for speeding was introduced) and the 10th September 2003 was 281. The figure for the comparable period in September 2002 was 353, a difference of 72 lives.<sup>3</sup>

A new danger is emerging on our roads and has recently been the subject of some preliminary research i.e. drugs driving. The Medical Bureau of Road Safety has completed a study in 2001 on the issue entitled *Drugs Driving in Ireland - A preliminary Study of the Prevalence of Driving under the Influence of Drugs on Irish Roads*.<sup>4</sup>

## Recommendations

An integrated strategy to tackle the high levels of fatalities and serious injuries on our roads must encompass measures to address all of the areas outlined above. Inappropriate and dangerous behaviours need to be tackled via sustained and committed investment in a targeted, integrative strategy encompassing what the National Safety Council describe as the 4 E's and prioritising expenditure on the most effective actions in order to produce a sustained and permanent reduction in the incidence of death and serious injury.

- a) Consistent ENFORCEMENT of existing laws.
- b) Optimal EDUCATION of all road users
- c) Safety to be a primary design criterion in ENGINEERING new road building projects.
- d) Continuing EVALUATION of all of the above actions to refine policy and increase its effectiveness.

It has been the experience over the period of the government's strategy, 1998-2002, that targeted road safety measures can help to prevent road accidents in spite of increased car ownership and motorisation. Effective road safety programmes need a combination of three things;

- 1) Public awareness of the risks associated with poor road-user behaviour'
- 2) A stringent enforcement regime and'
- 3) A consistent penalty system

## IMO Recommendations

The Irish Medical Organisation outlines a 20-point plan to improve the performance of road safety in Ireland;

1. Increase funding for the effective implementation and enforcement of the Penalty Points Systems introduced under the Road Traffic Act in 2002.
2. Ensure that the Penalty Points System is implemented .
3. Ensure that sufficient resources are provided for the national road safety awareness campaigns.
4. Research showing a direct positive relationship between speed levels and accident rates reveals a need to introduce more effective enforcement of speed limits in Ireland.
5. Speed limits need to be changed where appropriate. Specifically, the IMO recommends that a maximum speed limit of 20 mph (32 kph) be introduced in built up areas and housing estates.
6. Pedestrians represent 20% of all road deaths with the elderly one of the most vulnerable in this regard. Policies need to be designed and implemented to improve the risks for example, by adjusting pedestrian crossings to suit their needs.
7. Another vulnerable group in this regard are cyclists. The IMO believes that one way of improving the risks here is to make all cyclists wear protective headgear.
8. Another recommendation which would improve the safety of pedestrians and other vulnerable road users is the banning of 'Bull Bars' from all vehicles on the public highways.
9. The IMO recommends that a comprehensive set of Guidelines on Medical Fitness to Drive are developed and regularly updated.
10. The IMO believes that it is important to continue with public awareness campaigns on the dangers of driving under the influence of alcohol.
11. The IMO believes that there is a need to increase the rate of enforcement for drink driving offences in order to improve the safety of all road users.
12. Blood alcohol levels in Ireland need to be reduced in line with the EU standard i.e. from 80 mgs% to 50 mgs%.
13. Legislative powers to increase evidential breath-testing are important and need to be strengthened in an effort to combat drink-driving.
14. A new area of investigation in terms of regulation and enforcement is the issues of driving under the influence of other drugs and substances. The IMO believes that more funding is required for epidemiological investigation regarding the impact of drugs.
15. The IMO feels that in order to improve detection in this area the government should support drug-testing technology. The IMO recommends that random testing of drivers for mood altering drugs and substances is introduced as soon as possible.
16. The IMO also believes that the Gardaí need to be resourced in the training of drug-related impairment recognition.
17. The IMO recommends increased enforcement of seat belt use and the necessary resources to enable the law enforcement agencies to do so.
18. The IMO also recommend that legislation be introduced to ensure that seat belts are fitted and work in buses, including minibuses.
19. Continued policy developments are required to make the roads on which we travel safer. Road construction is an essential component of any good road safety strategy. In this regard, the IMO believes that the situation would improve if good quality roads were built between all the major towns and cities.
20. Non dual-carriageway roads should have passing lanes at regular intervals of five miles.

## References

- 1 *An Economic Assessment and Preliminary Cost Benefit Analysis of the Government Strategy for Road Safety 1998-2002: Final Report*, Peter Bacon & Associates, Economic Consultants, Wexford, August 1999.
- 2 Source: National Road Authority, Road Accident Facts: Ireland 2002.
- 3 NSC, Press Release, 18/9/03
- 4 *Drugs Driving in Ireland - A preliminary Study of the Prevalence of Driving under the Influence of Drugs on Irish Roads*. S. Moane, CP Leavy and DA Cusack, Medical Bureau of Road Safety , Dept of Forensic Medicine, UCD. *Medico Legal Journal of Ireland* (2001); Volume 7, No.1