

Road Safety Monitor 2024

Drinking & Driving in Canada

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KEY FINDINGS

- > The number of Canadians killed in road crashes involving a drinking driver decreased by 57.5% from 1996 to 2021 (from 1,079 to 459 fatalities).
- > In 2024, female drivers were 62% less likely than male drivers to report driving over the legal limit.
- > In 2024, each 10-year increase in age corresponded to a 25% reduction in the odds of driving after consuming alcohol above the legal limit.
- > In 2024, 5.9% of drivers admitted to driving after drinking over the legal limit in the past 30 days, compared to 5.8% in 2023.
- > Among the 5.9% of respondents who admitted to driving over the legal limit, 44.1% admitted to drinking at home, 43.3% admitted to drinking alone.

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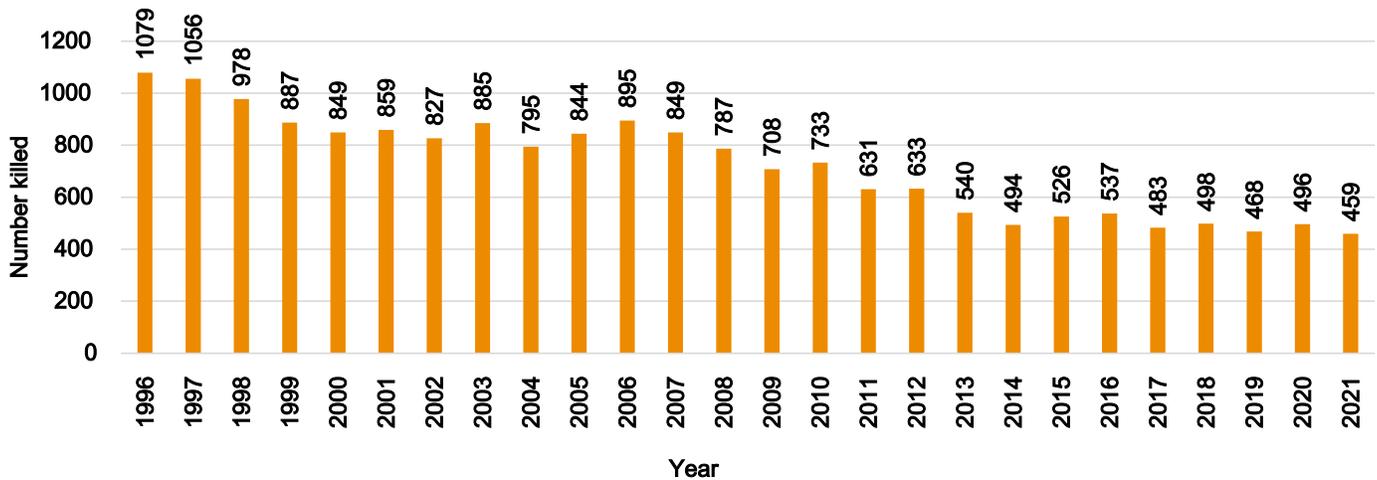
Introduction

This fact sheet summarizes findings about drinking and driving in Canada from the 2024 Road Safety Monitor (RSM), a national public opinion poll on road safety issues. This annual survey is conducted by the **Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF)** in partnership with **Beer Canada** and **Desjardins Insurance**. It gauges national attitudes on important road safety topics through an online survey conducted with a random, representative sample of Canadian drivers. Additionally, data from **TIRF's National Fatality Database** are presented to examine trends in traffic fatalities involving a drinking driver.

How many Canadians died in road crashes involving a drinking driver?

In 2021, the latest year for which complete data are available nationwide, 459 Canadians lost their lives in road crashes involving a drinking driver. These fatalities took place within a year of crashes occurring on public roadways across Canada. As shown in Figure 1, the number of fatalities in crashes involving a drinking driver declined overall between 1996 and 2021, representing a 57.46% decrease from 1,079 to 459 deaths.

Figure 1 | Number of Canadians killed in road crashes involving a drinking driver



What percentage of Canadians died in road crashes involving a drinking driver?

In 2021, 28.38% of persons killed in a road crash on public roadways in Canada involved a drinking driver. This percentage has decreased from a peak of 41.56% in 1996 and has consistently remained below 39.3%, despite some fluctuations. The percentage of alcohol-related road fatalities decreased to 28.38% in 2021 from 31.74% in 2019.

Has the percentage of drinking drivers on roadways increased?

In 2024, 11.4% of respondents admitted in the past 30 days to driving after consuming alcohol, compared to 13.0% in 2023. It is important to note that this includes drinking and driving after consuming lower levels of alcohol, even those below the legal or administrative limits (where applicable). Some distinct, though modest, trends have emerged over the years, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 2 | Percentage of Canadians killed in road crashes involving a drinking driver

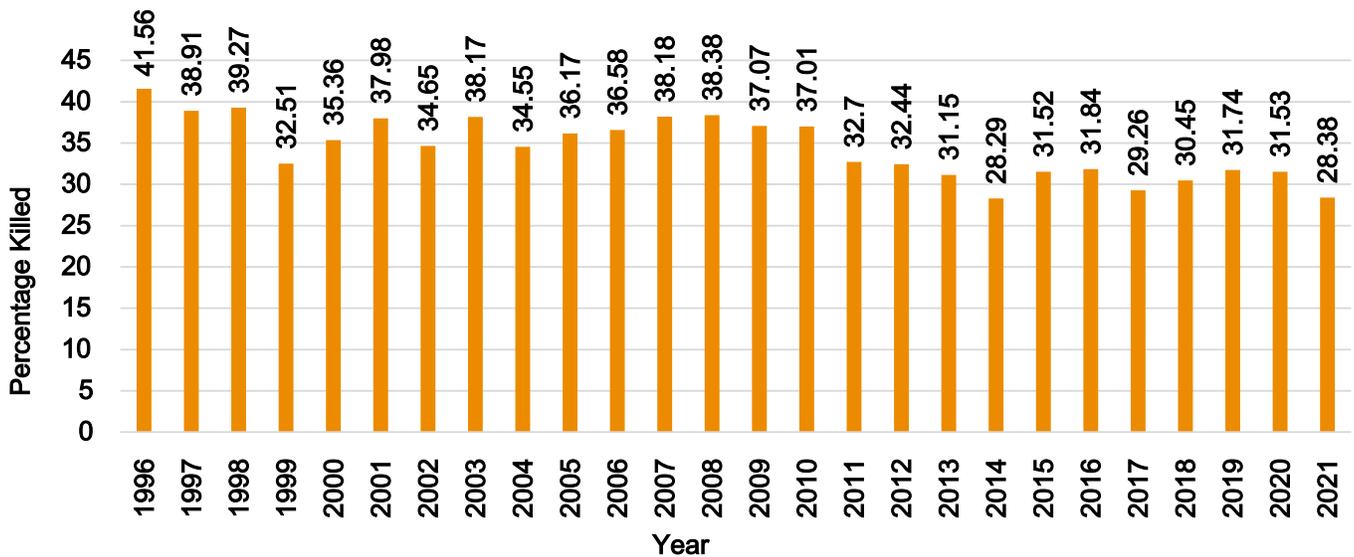
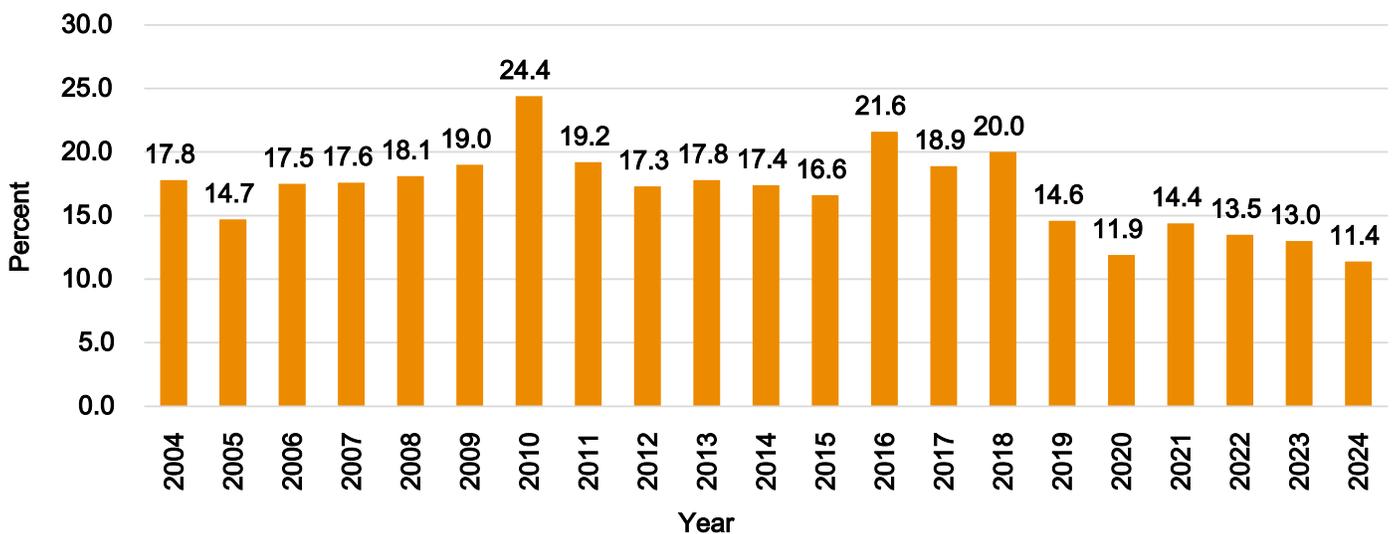


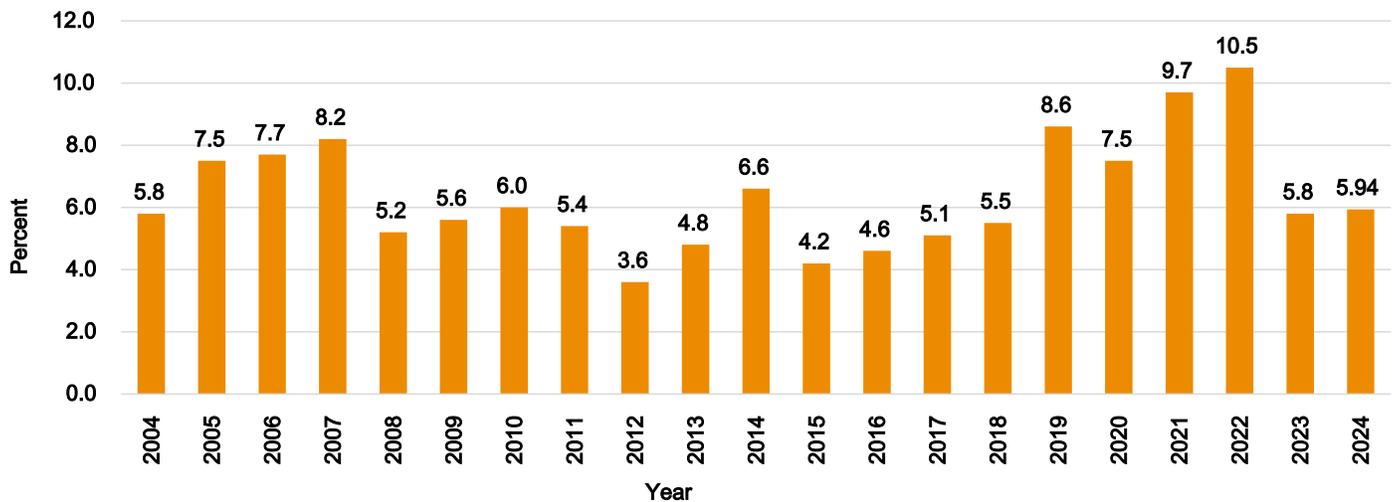
Figure 3 | Percentage of drinking drivers who drove after drinking any amount of alcohol



These data were analyzed using a piecewise linear regression model. From 2005 through to 2009, there was an upward trend in the percentage of respondents who admitted to driving after consuming any amount of alcohol. From 2011 to 2015, a downward trend followed. In 2016, the percentage rose significantly, which was then succeeded by a significant decline from 2017 to 2024.

In 2024, 5.94% of respondents reported having driven when they thought they were over the legal limit within the past year, which is similar to 5.8% in 2023. The previous year had seen a large and statistically significant drop from 10.5% in 2022. This marked a reversal of a trend, beginning in 2016, which showed a steady rise in the number of drivers admitting to driving over the legal limit.

Figure 4 | Percentage that drove when they thought they were over the legal limit



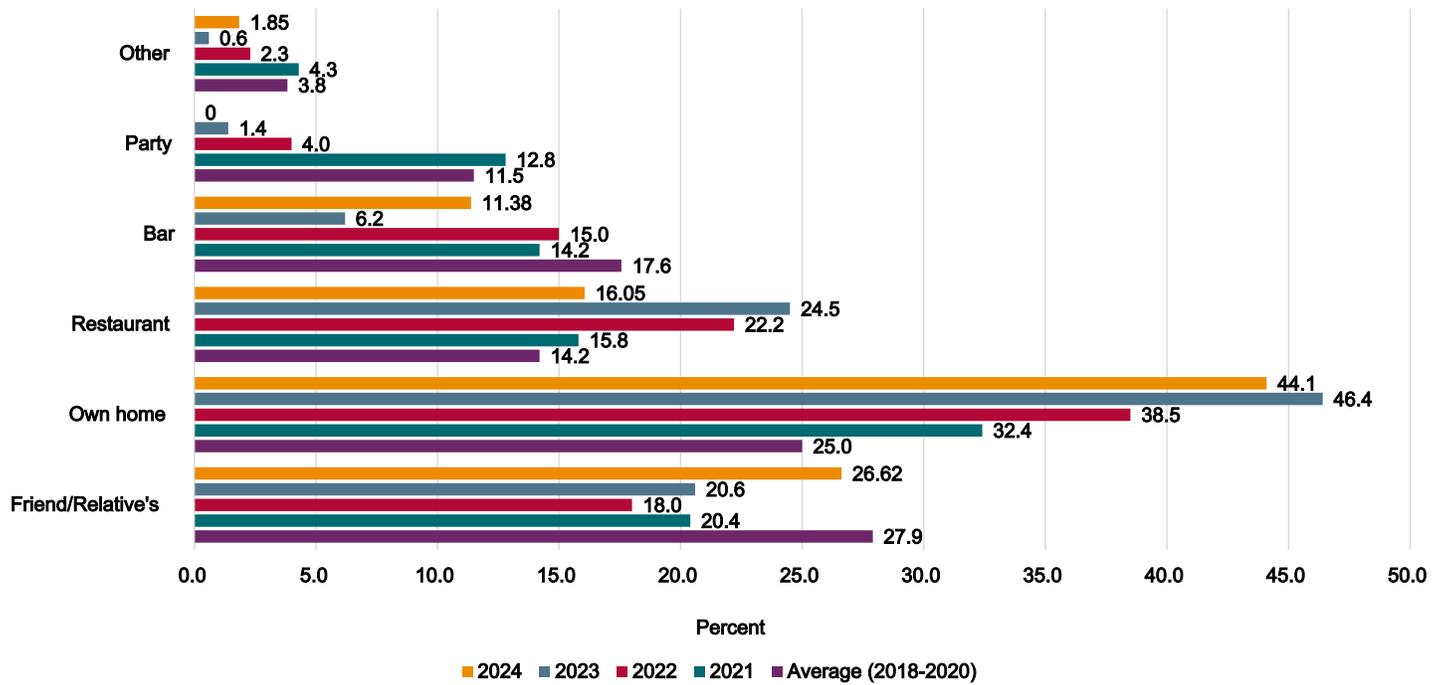
Where did drivers do most of their drinking?

Respondents who admitted to driving when they thought they were over the legal limit were asked where they typically drank. The results are shown in Figure 5. In 2024, 44.1% of these respondents indicated they did most of their drinking at home prior to driving, compared to 46.4% in 2023 and 38.5% in 2022, showing a decrease of 2.3% from 2023 to 2024. Drinking with friends or relatives ranked second, accounting for over a quarter of respondents (26.62%) in 2024, compared to 20.6% in 2023. The percentage who reported drinking mainly at restaurants dropped to 16.05% in 2024, down from 24.5% in 2023.

These results suggest that more persons who drive after drinking when they thought they were over the legal limit do so at their home, at the home of a friend or relative or in a restaurant. Conversely, a significantly smaller percentage of people who reported driving when they believed they were over the legal limit had been drinking at a bar or party (11.38% overall). It's worth noting that drinking at bars has increased compared to 2023, and the gap from pre-pandemic levels is narrowing.

These results suggest that the trend towards drinking primarily at home before driving while likely over the legal limit, which began during the COVID-19 pandemic, is continuing, although there is a slight decline from 2023 to 2024. This trend may be influenced by economic factors. According to the Spirits Business (Collins, 2023), 26% of U.S. consumers are allocating more money towards alcohol for home consumption rather than visiting bars, due to the rising cost of living. Similar drinking patterns are likely present in Canada, given comparable increases in living costs. Many online budgeting guides recommend reducing discretionary spending, such as dining out, in response to these economic pressures. Consequently, more individuals may be choosing to drink at home to not only minimize alcohol expenses but also avoid the additional costs associated with safe transportation to and from drinking locations (e.g., rideshares or taxis). Targeted messaging should be developed to effectively reach and influence these different groups, especially people who drink at home and then choose to drive.

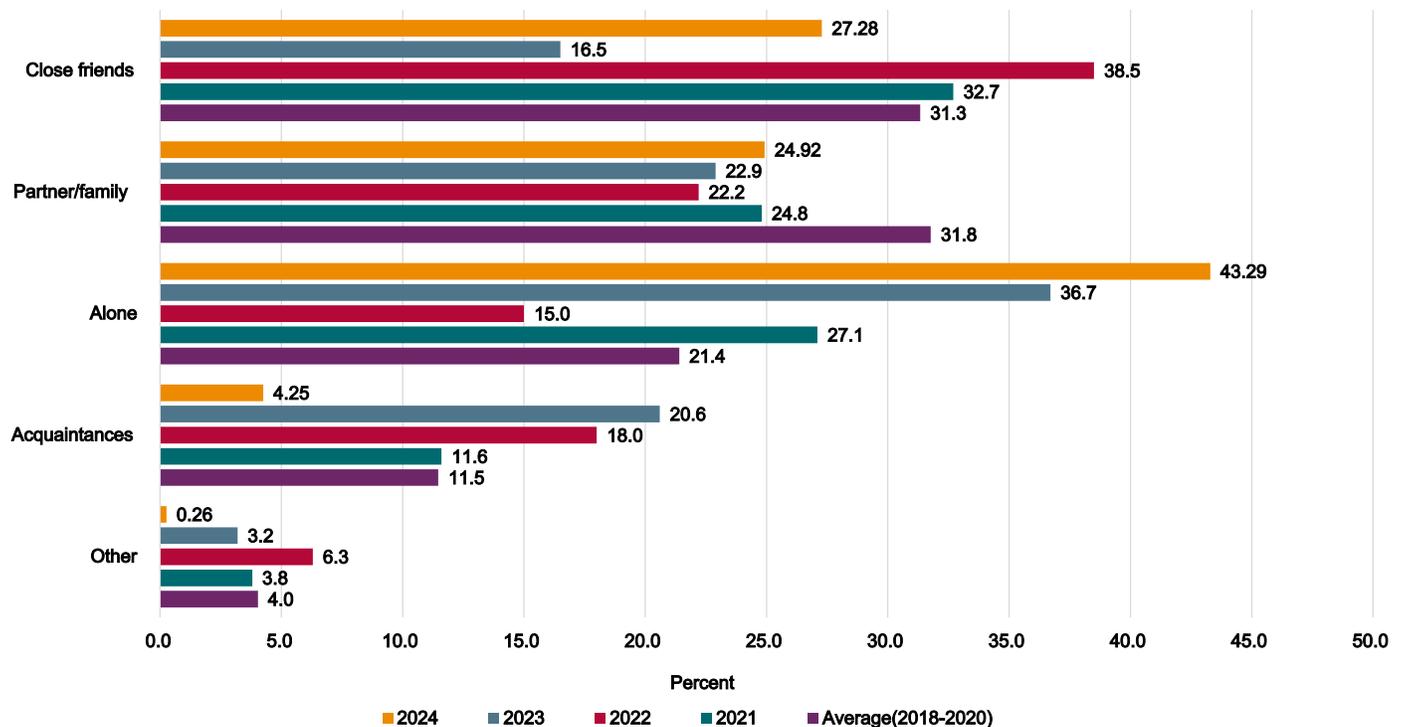
Figure 5 | Locations where Canadian drivers indicate doing most of their drinking



With whom did drivers do most of their drinking?

Respondents who admitted to driving while they thought they were over the legal limit were also asked about their typical drinking companions. As shown in Figure 6, in 2024, 43.29% of respondents reported drinking alone most frequently, up from 36.7% in 2023 and 15% in 2022. Over a quarter reported drinking mainly with close friends (27.28%) in 2024, compared to 16.5% in 2023, while 24.92% reported drinking primarily with a partner or family in 2024, up from 22.9% in 2023.

Figure 6 | Persons with whom Canadian drivers reported doing most of their drinking



The rise in solitary drinking may be linked to increased loneliness resulting from the lasting effects of pandemic-related social distancing, the shift to remote work and the availability of home entertainment options, such as online gaming, social media, and expanded streaming services. In 2023, the World Health Organization (WHO) identified loneliness as a global health priority, even referring to it as a global epidemic (Christensen, 2023). It is estimated that one in four older adults experience social isolation, while between 5% and 15% of adolescents report experiencing loneliness (WHO, 2024). Social isolation and loneliness are increasingly recognized as major public health issues, with an impact on mortality comparable to other significant risk factors such as smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity. This highlights the importance of addressing social isolation as part of public health initiatives, which may indirectly influence drinking behaviours.

In 2024, drinking with close friends increased by 10.78%, and drinking with a partner or family increased by 2%, compared to the previous year. In contrast, drinking with acquaintances saw a significant decline to 4.25% in 2024 from 20.6% in 2023.

While the rise in solitary drinking at home may partly be due to fewer social opportunities, this trend requires close monitoring, as it could have long-term effects on drinking and driving behaviours and influence the strategies needed to address this issue effectively.

Are certain groups of drivers more likely to drive after drinking than other drivers?

As previously noted, 11.4% of respondents in 2024 admitted to driving after consuming alcohol within the past 30 days. A logistic regression analysis was performed to evaluate the influence of sex and age on this behaviour. It is a statistical method used to determine the probability of a specific event occurring, based on a set of influencing factors. In this case, it was used to predict how likely someone was to drive after drinking, depending on their sex and age. Compared to males, female respondents were 76% less likely to report driving after consuming any amount of alcohol (OR: 0.24, CI: 0.17-0.33, $p=0.00$). This aligns with historical data on fatally injured drivers, which indicate that male drivers have consistently been more likely to test positive for alcohol than female drivers (Brown et al., 2018). The analysis also showed that a 10-year increase in age did not significantly affect the odds of driving after alcohol consumption ($p=0.972$). These findings are consistent with those of previous Canadian RSM surveys, where similar patterns were statistically significant.

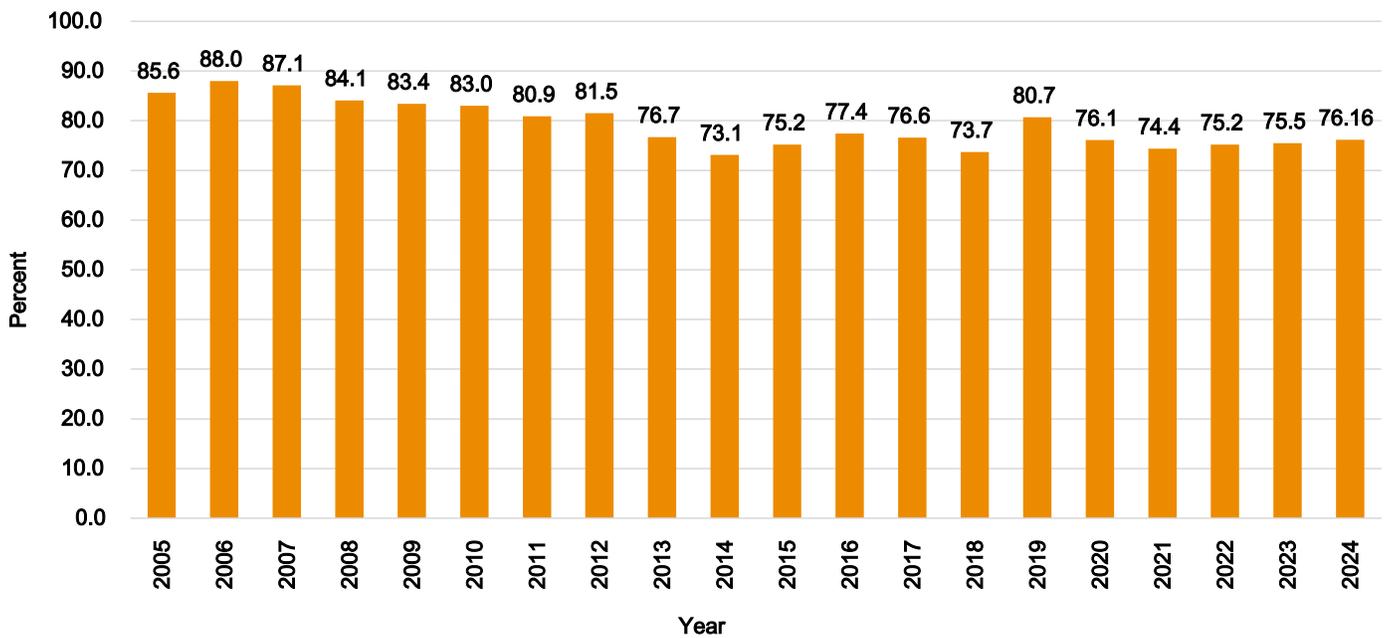
In 2024, 5.94% of survey respondents admitted to driving when they believed they were over the legal limit within the past 12 months. Logistic regression analysis revealed that female respondents were 62% less likely than males to drive after consuming alcohol above the legal limit (OR: 0.38, CI: 0.24-0.61, $p=0.00$). Age was also a significant factor, with each 10-year increase in age associated with a 25% decrease in the odds of driving when believing to be over the legal limit (OR: 0.75, CI: 0.67-0.84, $p=0.00$).

Is drinking and driving a major road safety issue for Canadians?

Canadians were asked how concerned they were with various public agenda priorities. Respondents rated their concern ranging from 1 (not concerned at all) to 6 (extremely concerned); for scoring purposes, respondents were coded as being concerned about an issue if they chose 5 or 6.

In 2024, approximately three-quarters of Canadian drivers (76.16%) identified drinking and driving as a public concern. Similar levels of concern were reported for drivers using cellphones (either handheld or hands-free) and drug-impaired drivers, with 71.81% and 72.8% of respondents expressing concern, respectively. However, impaired drivers were not the top concern, as 80.75% of respondents were worried about drivers texting while driving. As shown in Figure 7, while there have been fluctuations over time, the level of concern in recent years appears similar to the last decade. However, it is generally lower compared to surveys conducted from 2005 to 2012.

Figure 7 | Percentage of Canadians who regard drinking drivers as a very or extremely serious problem



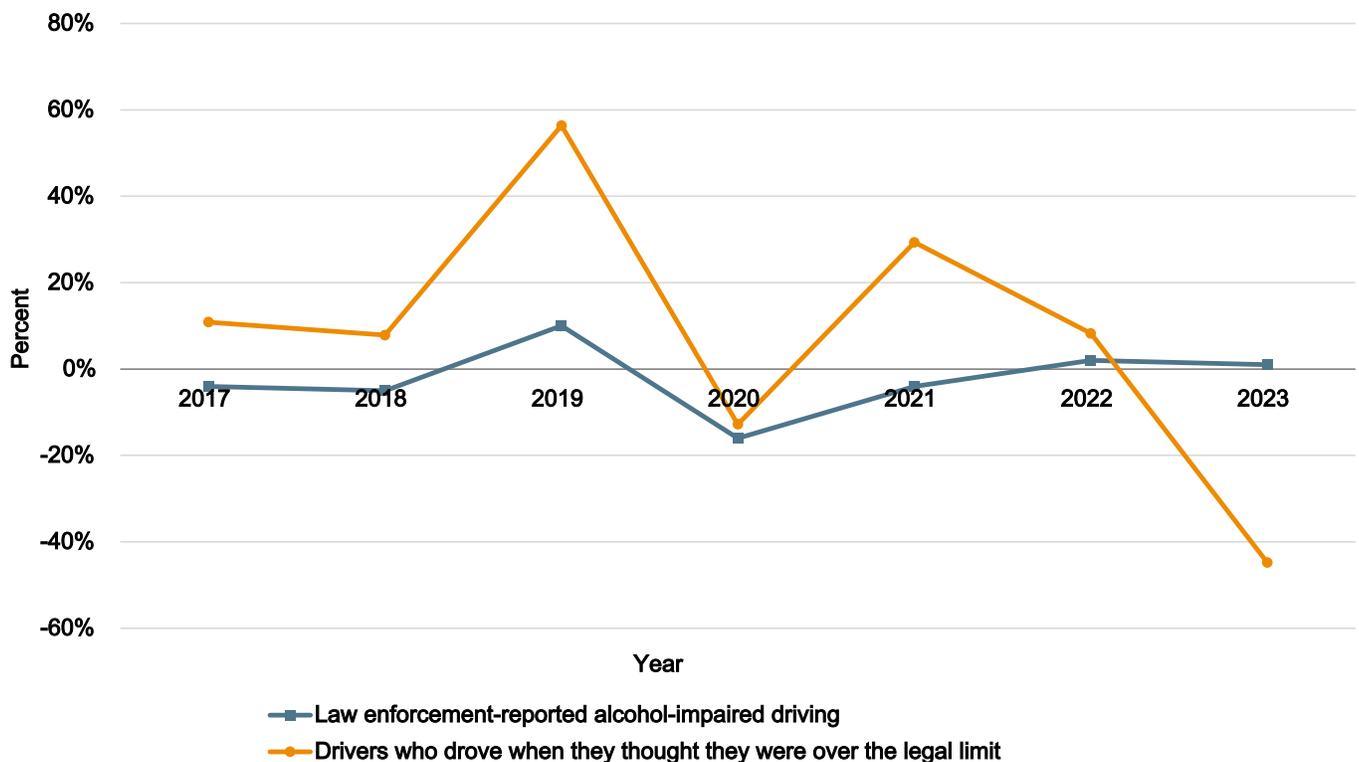
Law enforcement-reported alcohol-impaired driving

Data from Statistics Canada were analyzed to examine trends in law enforcement-reported alcohol-impaired driving from 2017 to 2023. These data were used to explore changes over time. The trends in law enforcement-reported alcohol-impaired driving largely mirrored those of drivers who admitted to driving when they thought they were over the legal limit, except for the final year, 2023. While there was no significant change in law enforcement-reported alcohol-impaired driving between 2022 and 2023, there was an almost 50% reduction in the proportion of drivers who admitted driving while they thought they were over the legal limit during the same period.

The increases in law enforcement-reported alcohol-impaired driving incidents, which align with the years when more drivers reported driving while over the legal limit, are expected, as a greater number of impaired drivers on the roads would lead to more opportunities for police intervention. The sharp decline in 2020 of both measures is likely attributable to the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw a decrease in impaired driving along with fewer roadside stops due to health safety concerns and shifting enforcement priorities. The increase in 2021 may reflect a return to pre-pandemic behaviours, as well as a shift back towards regular law enforcement practices once social distancing was no longer a significant concern for officers conducting roadside checks.

Notably, there was a 50% reduction in the proportion of drivers admitting to driving over the legal limit from 2022 to 2023, perhaps indicating that Canadians are becoming more compliant with regulations. However, police-reported incidents of alcohol-impaired driving did not change significantly between 2022 and 2023.

Figure 8 | Percent law enforcement-reported alcohol-impaired driving and drivers who drove when they thought they were over the limit



Conclusion

Canada has made significant progress in addressing drinking and driving, as evidenced by recent trends in alcohol-related road fatalities and the proportion of total road deaths involving impaired drivers. Between 1996 and 2021, the number of Canadians killed in crashes involving a drinking driver decreased by 57.46%.

Recent data shows although there was an uptick in 2020, fatalities decreased by 7.46% from 2020 to 2021. Conversely, the percentage of Canadians reporting that they drove while believing they were over the legal limit showed a consistent increase from 2015 to 2022, then slightly increasing to 5.94% in 2024 after declining to 5.8% in 2023. In years where more respondents admitted to driving over the legal limit, there was also an increase in law enforcement-reported alcohol-impaired driving, with the exception of 2023. Continued monitoring and comparisons of both self-reported and police-reported data will be important to informing future efforts aimed at preventing and reducing alcohol-impaired driving in Canada.

Certain trends, such as the rise in drinking at home and drinking alone, are likely influenced by social factors, including the increased cost of living, loneliness and the accessibility of home entertainment options, such as online gaming, social media, and expanded streaming services. It is crucial to tailor key messages specifically for the subgroup of Canadians who drink alone at home and subsequently drive. Enforcement strategies and awareness campaigns aimed at reducing alcohol-impaired driving may need to be adjusted to effectively address and prevent impaired driving and other associated risky behaviours.

Furthermore, as economic conditions improve, it is possible that drinking at bars and social gatherings will increase, with people allocating more of their budget and time to socializing with friends. This shift is reflected by the increase in the number of Canadians drinking at restaurants in 2024 compared to the average from 2018 to 2020 (16.05% vs 14.2%).

It is crucial to tailor key messages specifically for the subgroup of Canadians who drink alone at home and subsequently drive.

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Fatality Database Disclaimer

Data from TIRF's National Fatality Database may be subject to change as the closure of cases is ongoing. As such, there may be minor differences in this document compared to previous documents reporting on the same topic.

About the poll

These results are based on the RSM, an annual public opinion poll developed and conducted by TIRF. A total of 1,510 Canadians completed the poll in September of 2024. Results can be considered accurate within plus or minus 2.5%, 19 times out of 20. The majority of the questions were answered using a scale from one to six where six indicated high agreement, concern, or support and one indicated low agreement, concern or support.

About TIRF's National Fatality Database

TIRF's National Fatality Database is the only Canadian road safety database that includes both police-reported collision data and coroners'/medical examiners' data (Simpson et al. 1978). It includes population data on victims, crashes and vehicles from seven Canadian jurisdictions since 1973 and from all Canadian jurisdictions since 1987. Comprehensive toxicological data on alcohol and drug use are based on chemical tests of body fluid samples, typically blood.

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The vision of the Traffic Injury Research Foundation (TIRF) is to ensure people using roads make it home safely every day by eliminating road deaths, serious injuries and their social costs. TIRF's mission is to be the knowledge source for safe road users and a world leader in research, program and policy development, evaluation, and knowledge transfer. TIRF is a registered charity and depends on grants, awards, and donations to provide services for the public. Visit linktr.ee/tirfcanda.

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