

Strict drunk driving laws may not help: expert

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New data on impaired drivers casts doubt on the effectiveness of strict administrative penalties for anyone caught driving under the influence.

In an exclusive interview with the Herald, Traffic Injury Research Foundation president Robyn Robertson said Alberta already has a "good structure" in place to deal with impaired drivers and that alcohol-related driving fatalities have declined steadily since 1995.

And as the province prepares to propose changes to drunk driving laws this month, Robertson said Alberta should be cautious about including stiff administrative penalties for driving with a blood-alcohol concentration (BAC) below the legal limit of 0.08.

Last month, Premier Alison Redford hinted that she was considering tougher drunk driving laws similar to those in B.C., which has the toughest administrative penalties of any jurisdiction in Canada.

But stiffer penalties for drivers with lower BAC levels may not be effective when the latest data shows that in Alberta, 63 per cent of fatally injured drivers who tested positive for alcohol had a BAC over 0.16.

Robertson said the province should adopt distinct strategies to address different kinds of drunk drivers — including repeat drunk drivers and young impaired drivers.

"Each of these populations is unique and requires different approaches and solutions to address it."

And lumping lower-risk offenders in with repeat offenders under stricter sanctions can do more harm and may actually increase their likelihood of repeat offending.

"You can end up creating a higher-risk offender," Robertson said. "The punishment needs to be proportional to the crime."

The foundation has determined that the best strategies to deal with repeat offenders include alcohol ignition interlock devices that prevent drivers from starting their vehicle if they've consumed alcohol, remedial licensing and alcohol treatment programs — all of which already exist in the province.

The key, according to Robertson, is following through with existing sanctions by monitoring offenders.

"It's making sure that offenders are consistently completing the licence suspension periods and having the ignition interlock installed," Robertson said.