



Announcer:

It's time for the *IHSA Safety Podcast*.

Enzo Garritano:

Hi, my name is Enzo Garritano and I'm President and CEO of IHSA, or Infrastructure Health and Safety Association. I want to welcome you to our inaugural or very first podcast here in this format. For those of you who are new to IHSA, IHSA or Infrastructure Health and Safety Association is a safe workplace association. We're recognized under the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and we're partners in Ontario's health and safety system. We like to pride ourselves on being the trusted health and safety resource for the construction, electrical utilities and transportation sectors. And we're committed to improving health and safety outcomes for both employers and workers in these sectors. We're proud of our role in helping to make Ontario one of the safest places in Canada to work.

This episode will focus on a topic that all our sectors are impacted by each and every day, and for that matter, most of Ontarians as well. And that is road safety and driving safety. We all have a role to play in sharing the road safely with other road users, whether you're driving for work as a professional class driver or commuting to work every day, working on the roads or simply using the roads recreationally. So our goal is to increase awareness and education around safe driving practices to ensure that all Ontario workers get home safely to their loved ones at the end of each and every day.

This podcast on road safety is in collaboration with and supported by the Ministry of Transportation. So I do want to thank Minister Caroline Mulroney and her staff for their help in getting very key messages to a broader audience in this new format. Today's host for the session will be IHSA's Director of Stakeholder and Client Engagement, Michelle Roberts, who has been working very closely with the transportation sector over the last couple of years to identify the greatest risks in that sector and come up with practical solutions. So welcome, Michelle.

I'm very excited also to introduce our very first guest joining us today on our first podcast. And that's OPP [Ontario Provincial Police] Sergeant Kerry Schmidt, who many of you'll be familiar with. Sgt. Schmidt has been with the Ontario Provincial Police for over 20 years and began his career as a frontline traffic enforcement officer who later specialized as a commercial vehicle inspector and collision reconstructionist. These roles sent him through the greater Toronto area, attending, investigating hundreds of fatal or serious injury collisions. Kerry was promoted to the rank of sergeant in 2011 and worked at the Port Credit detachment before he moved into the role of media relations. He is active on social media and is often seen and heard throughout the region updating the media and public speaking about traffic safety.

Many may also recognize Sergeant Schmidt as a key spokesperson and advisor on *Heavy Rescue: 401*. He is a prominent voice, advocate, and ambassador among road safety partners, and in 2020 received MTO's Award for Excellence in the media category. So congratulations on that. IHSA has worked with Sergeant Schmidt along with the Fleet Safety Council to raise awareness of road safety issues. We are very thrilled to have him join us today to kick off IHSA's very first podcast. So welcome, Sgt. Schmidt.

Sgt. Kerry Schmidt:

Thank you for having me.

Enzo Garritano:

You're welcome. Thanks again for your time here. And now I'll pass it over to Michelle Roberts, again, our host, to carry on with today's conversation on road safety.

Michelle Roberts:

Thank you, Enzo. As you noted in the introduction, in this episode, we really want to chat with Sergeant Kerry Schmidt from the OPP about road safety and discuss the ins and outs of sharing the road safely in general with all road users, but with a particular emphasis on large commercial vehicles as well. As you noted, it's relevant to all those who drive for work, whether you're operating a large commercial vehicle or you're driving, commuting to work, or sharing the roads just as a regular extracurricular activity. We want to hear from Kerry on his experiences in particular on some of those high risk driving behaviors or the conditions or situations he sees out on the highways. And importantly, we will be reinforcing safe driving tips on how to share the road safely. So thank you for joining us today, Sgt. Kerry Schmidt. Welcome.

Sgt. Kerry Schmidt:

Thank you so much. It's a pleasure to be here. Should be a great conversation.

Michelle Roberts:

If we could, let's start with some of those statistics. Can you share with us some of the numbers from 2020 and perhaps the number of collisions that were reported and investigated by the OPP?

Sgt. Kerry Schmidt:

Yeah, absolutely. And it's pretty interesting, obviously we're all aware of the COVID pandemic that we're dealing with and how that affected traffic throughout the province, throughout the country, really around the world. Typically, in years past, we would always have between 70 and 75,000 crashes on any given year. Last year in 2020 we had 55,000 crashes, which is considerably down from where we were the year previous. And obviously we all saw the reduction in traffic, people working from home and all the other factors that go along with that. But unfortunately, we also still saw collisions and we also saw a lot of aggressive driving out on the roads, passenger vehicles and drivers just being not consistent with what the rules of the road and how we share the road. It was always all about making sure essential workers could get to work and commercial truck traffic could make their deliveries.

And so when we looked at the numbers, we still saw a considerable number of fatalities. I think our fatal crashes last year in 2020, we had 305 fatalities and compared to the year before, we had 335 fatalities. And that is not consistent with the type of reduction in traffic that we had seen. And I guess to complicate it or to amplify the message regarding commercial truck traffic, which is what we're dealing with here, we had 57 fatal crashes and fatal injuries resulting.... Sorry, let me do it one more time. I'm just getting a little bit mixed up here. So in 2020 when we're focusing more on commercial truck traffic,

57 people were killed in collisions involving commercial transport trucks. And that is certainly a concern for us because when we look at the number of trucks out on the highways, there is a lot of truck traffic, but they don't account for maybe the same percentage of collisions. And very often when a collision involves a transport truck, the risk of serious injury or fatality are that much greater just because of the size, weight, momentum of these vehicles.

Michelle Roberts:

Well, it's kind of sad to hear that despite the volume of the traffic that we would've seen during the pandemic, unfortunately we still had over 300 loss of life, which is something that we want to try to raise awareness on and prevent those. And when I was reading some of those statistics released last week from the OPP, it was noted and it's a reoccurring theme, we've got these top four factors, the four things that we know enforcement tends to focus on because they are the behaviors we're seeing out on the road that are contributing to these crashes. And so let's talk a little bit more on some of those top four. And I know I've heard you mention before, that speed, we have impaired, we have inattentive or distracting. And then the most surprising one for me still that I hear is the lack of seatbelt use. So let's start with that. I mean, the seatbelts, they've been in law for over 40 years, so how is it we're still seeing so many related to lack of use of the seatbelt?

Sgt. Kerry Schmidt:

And it's not always the drivers. Sometimes it may be passengers as well. I know a little alarms that go off in your vehicle that keep beeping when you don't have your seatbelt on may be the reason people put their seatbelts on to get rid of that annoying buzzer. But we still see drivers, passengers, rear passengers as well, not wearing their seatbelts, also in ride-shares, taxis, public transit where there may not be seatbelts, but in passenger vehicles where they are equipped, they should be wearing the seatbelts. But there seems to be this reluctance for people to put on their seatbelt when they're in the back seat of a vehicle thinking they're all cocooned, all nice and safe and snug in the back of a vehicle. But if there's a collision, you don't realize how many forces of gravity are going to be exerted in that collision.

And if we have a crash pulse, even a simple crash can easily go up to 50, 60, 70 gs, peak gs. And so if you imagine if you weigh a hundred pounds at 50 g's times 50, you're now 5,000 lb., or 10,000 lb. if you're 200 pounds. There is so much mass and so much energy in these collision events, you don't realize how dangerous it is. And there is no amount of love that a mother could hold a baby, even a 10 pound baby will end up being 500 pounds as it slips out of your arms. And so you need to have yourself properly secured and buckled inside a car seat, seatbelt, whatever's appropriate for your size, age, and weight.

It really is sad that we see this all too often. We had a serious collision rollover just a couple of nights ago that I was dealing with and the driver is lucky to be alive right now. He was involved in this collision. But it's still very traumatic and so many injuries, it's so preventable. Put on that seatbelt. It's not about the airbags and the safety cage, which is there to protect you, but the seatbelt keeps you in that spot so you can take advantage of those safety systems that these vehicles have become so reliable in terms of their safety. But again, you need to be buckled up properly.

Michelle Roberts:

Thank you for that. And it's a good reminder. I mean, it seems strange to get into a vehicle without buckling up. And we want to remind everybody, including like you say those in the back seat, those who may be getting in for short durations, it's there, it's totally preventable, will save your life if you're involved in a collision or can help to prevent the severity.

I'll tell you, I talked to a woman who was involved in a collision as well. She had her seatbelt on and she was involved in a collision rollover and her vehicle rolled probably eight or 10 times. We actually have it on dash cam. It is absolutely stunning to see that. And she came out of that with very minor injuries. She had a broken wrist and that was it. And had she not been wearing her seatbelt, I can pretty much assure you that she would be dead at this time. And it really is just a simple, it's the best piece of insurance, so put it on. There are so many other issues that we deal with that are preventable and the seatbelt shouldn't even be an issue, but we still see it continuing to linger.

Michelle Roberts:

Right. And if you're just joining us, we are meeting right now with OPP Officer Sgt. Kerry Schmidt, who is currently sitting on the side of the highway taking this call with us. So thank you so much for joining us. And we're talking about the top four and those risky driving behaviors that we're seeing so much of that are contributing to collisions on our highways and roadways. So let's talk about impaired, and this is another one where we know some of the legislation has recently changed. Some of the rules have changed due to impairment, not from alcohol because that's an old standing issue, but certainly with drugs and the legalization of cannabis, etcetera. So let's talk a little bit about what you guys are seeing out on the road when it comes to impairment.

Sgt. Kerry Schmidt:

It's funny, I've been talking to officers out on the roads as well, and they are finding so many impaired driving offences, occurrences recently, even during the pandemic. And I don't know where people are going to drink or why they're impaired, but officers seem to have noticed an increase and maybe that's what they're coming across more often with less traffic on the roads. We're still doing ride checks and ensuring people's sobriety at investigations all the time. Last year, again, we had 51 people die in collisions that were alcohol or drug related. And there's some new legislation as well that allows us to provide mandatory alcohol screening, roadside tests to anyone who we lawfully stop. So anytime you're stopped by an officer, they may very well ask you to blow into a device to get a breath sample to see whether or not you have exceeded the allowable amount of alcohol.

Now, if you're a graduated driver, a novice or young driver, there's zero tolerance and zero allowed amount of alcohol that you can have in your system and drugs as well. If you're impaired by anything, you should not be on the roads. When you are a fully graduated G driver, yes, there is a certain amount that is allowed, but again, anytime you put something into your system, it's changing your ability to react timely and have that full presence and awareness of your surroundings. And anything that decreases your reaction times is putting yourself in jeopardy because we've all seen how quickly traffic can go from highway speed, full flow, to all of a sudden having it come to a grinding halt. And if you're not paying attention because of impairment, because of fatigue or because of distraction, all those driving behaviors look very similar to one another.

And that is, again, on the driver to make sure that they are in full control of their vehicles because the most important person in a vehicle is that driver. And if you're not able to drive that vehicle with your full control and with your full awareness and presence, you're putting yourself in huge jeopardy along with everybody else on the highway.

Michelle Roberts:

And also the legislation has zero tolerance for commercial drivers as well, right?

Sgt. Kerry Schmidt:

That's right. Yeah. So with a young novice and graduate, of course commercial drivers as well, zero tolerance for anyone operating an A or D or a classed-up vehicle that requires their full attention. And that's where we see these collisions. When there's a collision involving a transport truck or a large vehicle, the potential for injuries is that much greater. And so the responsibility on these professional drivers, they're held to a higher standard as well, and they need to understand their responsibilities to making sure that they are safe for the highway.

Michelle Roberts:

One other thing that I think perhaps I've heard a little bit more in the news lately during the pandemic, which is definitely surprising, is the speed and aggressive driving and the terminology of the stunt driving and the street racing. And it seemed to be on the rise with lower traffic volumes because of the pandemic. So what is it that you guys are seeing out there now?

Sgt. Kerry Schmidt:

Well, yeah, speeding and aggressive driving, right when the pandemic kicked in last year, we saw a huge reduction in traffic. And all of a sudden, instead of just finding stunt drivers and aggressive drivers late at night, on the weekends, on less traveled highways, we were seeing them throughout the day, midday weekdays where the traffic volumes were lighter, the highway was open. All of a sudden, people are seeing this as an opportunity to take advantage of the highways and push their vehicles to a speed that is completely irresponsible. We had a driver going over 300 km an hour. That driver was stopped, the vehicle was impounded, it was a routine traffic stop that ended well. But that driver is still before the courts to answer to those offenses.

We had a driver as well just last week, 221 km per hour. Crazy speeds. When you're going about 30 m a second or thereabouts at the speed limit and you double that and you're now going 60 m or thereabouts every second, for drivers to understand what's happening and how quickly they're closing on another vehicle or how much another vehicle is closing on them, if they turn out of an intersection, change lanes in front of them, there may be no opportunity to escape. And when it comes to other sizes of vehicles, motorcycles, sports cars, sharing the road with transport trucks. We had another incident where a driver driving excessively fast, for some reason didn't recognize that there was a transport truck driving along at the speed limit in the right lane. And unfortunately, the driver slammed right into the back of the transport truck. He was killed in that collision and it should not have been.

There needs to be that awareness, but obviously when you have that kind of closing speed, those impacts are massive and it really is tragic that officers get called to this and first responders are there trying to investigate, figure out what took place and then prevent that from happening again. And that's where communications and awareness, and I'm so grateful for you to be putting on this podcast as well to get that awareness out so people understand the consequences of poor decisions. And they may not think it's going to happen to them, but when all of a sudden they're in a situation they can't get out of, it's just a matter of milliseconds before tragedy could strike.

Michelle Roberts:

Yeah. And we know that with the increased speed tends to increase the severity of the outcome. So it's something not only is the fines and penalties, I know the enforcement has gone up to try to tackle that issue, demerit points or vehicle impoundment, those are all severe consequences. But certainly the ultimate one would be injury or fatality. And we want to prevent that. And important for everyone to be following the speed, adjusting your speed, especially weather, road conditions change so dramatically, so fast. So we want to be conscious of that for sure.

Sgt. Kerry Schmidt:

Yeah. How do you share the road with one another, and dealing with winter weather and less than ideal conditions, maybe in the rain, people are going to be maybe more hypersensitive and alert to the situation. But when it's a beautiful sunny day and the roads are dry, often people will become a little more lulled and complacent with their actions and not realizing how much their actions play in how safe the highways are. And when we get a collision on dry roads, clear skies, sunny days like this, the outcomes can be even more dramatic and tragic. And that's why, again, it comes down to drivers being in full awareness of their situation. We don't have autonomous vehicles, we don't have self-driving vehicles just yet. We're getting close. But until such time, whoever's in that driver's seat needs to have their hands on the wheel, their eyes on the road, and their mind aware of what's happening around them. And use your mirrors and be aware of your surroundings.

Michelle Roberts:

And I think that leads nicely to the next topic that we know is definitely a growing concern, is the distracted driving, or inattentive driving is also the same terminology. And as you mentioned, you need to be focused on the road, hands on the wheel, eyes on the road, mind on the task is very important. And it's not always distracted by a cell phone. I mean, we hear a lot about it, but we know there's other distractions too. So what are some of those things you're seeing when it comes to inattentive or distracted driving?

Sgt. Kerry Schmidt:

Well, again, cell phones are probably the biggest source of frustration. We see it all the time. The public sees it. You're at a red light and the light turns green and the person in front of you has their head pointed down in their lap and you know they're on their phone and they're just unaware of it. They think that's okay. Well, it's not. Anytime your vehicle is on the highway, whether you're moving or not, if you're holding a handheld communication device, you're liable for the offence of distracted driving. And

again, we see it on the highways, we almost see it even more in rush hour, stop and go traffic. When traffic is slow, people think there's less risk to themselves, and what are they going to do with their time? Well, let's just check our text messages and see what else is going on in the world. Well, that's the exact wrong place to do it because you go forward and all of a sudden traffic stops and you're done.

Now again, there's been increased penalties in the distracted driving laws recently in Ontario, which results in automatic three-day license suspension anytime you are convicted of the offense. That's upon conviction. When we're talking back about aggressive driving and stunt driving and street racing, there is an automatic sanction of a seven-day license suspension and the seven-day vehicle impound at the time of the offense. That is not the penalty for the offense. The penalty function comes later in the conviction in court. And that just stops the continuation of that offense. And so some people may think a seven-day suspension and vehicle impound may be light in terms of penalty. Well, that's not the penalty. That's just to stop it.

The penalty comes later, which can come up to \$10,000 just as distracted driving, automatic three-day license suspension, \$490 ticket at the side of the road, and it can go up from there to thousands of dollars as well. And again, that's where we have seen this huge increase in deaths and fatalities. And it's not just cell phones, it can be papers and books. We've seen people doing all kinds of crazy things in the vehicles that should not have any place in a vehicle. And again, how do truck drivers or long-distance drivers pass the time? They're sitting in their vehicle for eight, 10 hours at a time. It's beautiful scenery out there. The job is driving, and you can't start filling that time by watching movies and texting and being on your phone and playing games because we've seen all those kinds of behaviors from drivers of all sorts, commuters and long-distance drivers as well.

Michelle Roberts:

Yeah, and I think that's an important piece here. We always talk about people wanting to multitask and being able to do something to pass the time while I'm driving, I'm on this commute that happens all the time. You become very complacent. But really nobody's good at multitasking when it comes to driving. You have to focus on one task, and that task needs to be driving and operating that piece of equipment safely because ultimately, at the end of the day, you're sharing the road with other road users. You're not only responsible for your own safety, but for those around you. And that's important. And I know we're trying to, as an association at IHSA, we're trying to create that awareness and that social piece that says distracted or inattentive driving, it's not acceptable. It's not something that we should be able to tolerate.

We should be able to convey to whether I'm in the vehicle with another a driver and they're picking up their phone or they're toggling their music or plugging in their device to say, "Hey, you know what? Let's focus on the road. You need to really target in on that task." And so one of the things that IHSA has worked on in the last couple years, and I know through safety partners like the OPP, we're trying to create that social message. We want individuals to get home safely at the end of the day. And unfortunately, the Ontario stats in workplaces show that motor vehicle incidents are the leading cause of worker fatalities. So distracted driving we know is one of those behaviors. It's completely preventable. We need to change the outcomes and allow people to know that we need to manage those risks when we're driving. It is a highly functionally demanding job, so don't multitask, don't do other things.

And so we did put together a series of social awareness. We had a radio ad that ran in 2020 to try to create that message and that piece that it's easy to be distracted, but you do need to focus on the road. And so I encourage our listeners today, if they haven't checked out some of those resources, because we did put together employer toolkits, so safety talk, there's posters, there's safety tips. We have free no charge eLearning course. There's a variety of information there to help manage the risk, in particular, how to prevent distracted driving. So please, we encourage you to check that out at ihsa.ca/drivesafe.

Enzo Garritano:

You're listening to *IHSA Safety Podcast*. Thanks again for joining us for our first episode with OPP Sgt. Kerry Schmidt. Join us again as we continue with episode two, tips for sharing the road with large trucks.

Announcer:

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