

Irish Road Deaths, behind the Headlines

Irish Independent 12/5/2005

"Garda blitz to cut spiralling road carnage"

Irish Examiner 6/1/2006

"Spiralling road carnage in the Republic is in stark contrast to the latest statistics from Northern Ireland, which reflect the lowest death toll there in over half a century."

Sunday Independent 1/1/2006

"Cullen under fire as road deaths soar"

Irish Times 21/12/2005

"The problem of tackling the ever-rising road death toll"

We have all seen and heard the media reports on Ireland's road death statistics, but many may not have examined the more detailed statistics and trends behind the headlines. In this article, I try to dig a little deeper in order to gain an understanding of what the recent and longer term trends in road deaths have been. How does the Irish experience compare with that of our European neighbours? What effect did the introduction of penalty points have, and has this effect persisted to any degree?

Recent Trends in Road Deaths

Although the daily reports of the mounting death toll are appalling, Irish road fatalities have been on a downward trend for many years. (Fig 1).

The downward trend is somewhat masked by the relatively strong growth in population and the very strong growth in car ownership. 2003 saw the lowest number of deaths for over forty years and this is commonly attributed to the introduction of penalty points in late 2002. Since 2003, the absolute number of fatalities has risen.

However, when we look at deaths per car, we see an even stronger downward trend. The number of deaths per car has fallen by almost 70% over the last twenty-five years. Unfortunately, the improving trend has been halted and somewhat reversed in 2004 and 2005. The current year got off to a poor start with fatalities above last year's levels at the time of writing.

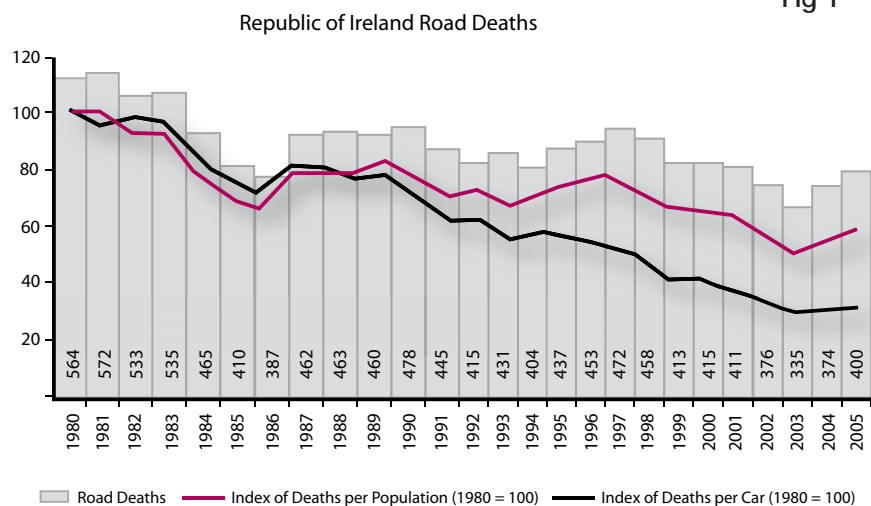
Comparison with European Experience

A comparison against European experience shows some interesting trends. Road death figures are commonly shown per 100,000 of population. On this basis, the Republic of Ireland is in line with the old EU15 average but significantly behind the best performers. Northern Ireland has significantly poorer experience than the UK as a whole and the Republic has been playing catch-up on Northern Ireland over the past decade.

However, per capita rates hide the fact that car ownership in Ireland is below that of other comparative countries. Despite the continuing strong growth in car ownership, the number of cars per 1,000 of population in 2005 was 418, which is still quite a bit below the UK's 2002 figure of 447.

Adjusting for car ownership, the commonly used measure is Deaths per 10,000 Private Cars. In the following graph (Fig 2), I show trends for the Republic of Ireland (ROI), Northern Ireland (NI), and the Old EU15¹. I also show data for the UK, which on most measures can be considered the best performer in the EU, closely followed by the Netherlands and Sweden. Because car ownership has been growing rapidly in both the Republic and Northern Ireland in recent years, the downward trend is stronger when the data is viewed in this way. This graph shows that Northern Ireland has been in line with the old EU15 for many years, while the Republic has been rapidly catching up from a very poor starting point.

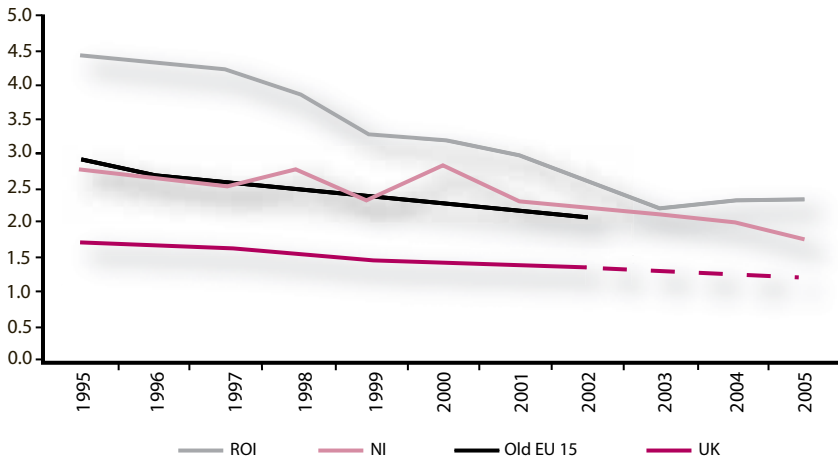
Fig 1



¹The statistics for the new accession states are significantly poorer.

Deaths Per 10,000 Private Cars

Fig 2



If the rate of deaths per car had been maintained at immediate post-penalty points levels there would have been 255 fewer deaths, or about 78 fewer deaths per year. If we had been able to achieve UK levels, the number of lives saved would have been 560, about 172 per year, or almost one life saved every two days.

Conclusion

We have seen that Ireland has made major strides in improving road death statistics in the past quarter of a century. However, even at our best, we still lag a long way behind the EU's top performers, particularly when we allow for the lower volume of cars on Irish roads.

Striking improvements were made after the introduction of penalty points. Deaths per car fell by 34% in the first six months of the new regime. Subsequently, this reduction fell back to about 17%. There is no guarantee that this will be sustained and it is notable that the most recent twelve months have seen the highest death toll for some time.

Finally, it is sobering to reflect that if we had been able to match the UK's safety record, we could have saved almost one life for every two days since May 2003.

Declan Lavelle

Data Sources:

- ROI Statistics www.garda.ie
- www.environ.ie
- www.nsc.ie
- NI Statistics www.psn.police.uk
- www.nisra.gov.uk
- www.drdni.gov.uk
- EU Statistics www.europa.eu.int/comm/transport/care/
- http://epp.eurostat.cec.eu.int

In the last two years, Northern Ireland has continued to improve, while the trend in the Republic has reversed. I have also projected the UK values forward from 2002 to allow a comparison for 2004 and 2005.

If we finally consider the UK as a baseline, we find that the Republic's rate reached its lowest ever level in 2003, at about 70% above the UK rate. This shows just how far we have to go to match EU best practice.

What effect did the introduction of penalty points have?

I have already mentioned the sharp fall in road deaths in 2003 which has been credited to the introduction of penalty points in November 2002. The graph below (Fig 3) shows road death statistics for six-month intervals

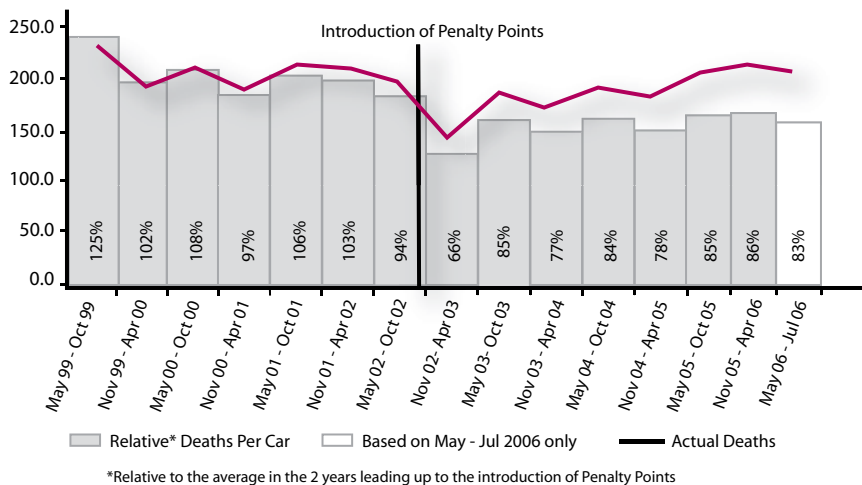
November-April and May-October respectively. This allows us to see the performance in the six months immediately following the introduction of penalty points and subsequent six-month periods.

The six months from November 2002 to April 2003 saw 141 road deaths which was just 66% of the rate of deaths per car in the two years leading up to the introduction of penalty points. However, the death rate increased again after a six-month "honeymoon" period. The relative death rate per car from May 2003 to July 2006 has been about 83% of pre-penalty points levels. Therefore, in high level terms, about half the initial improvement has been sustained.

There have been 1,251 road deaths between May 2003 and July 2006.

Effect of Penalty Points

Fig 3



*Relative to the average in the 2 years leading up to the introduction of Penalty Points