

Three Lanes to Safer Roads

According to data released in February by Japan's National Police Agency, road accident fatalities in 2008 were at their lowest level for more than fifty years. Advances in automobile safety technologies, improvements to the road system itself, and tougher regulations have all played a part. With a focus on the last of these, **Gavin Blair** explains the reasons for the decline in road deaths.

While Japan's streets are famously safe in terms of the low levels of violent crime, the same could not always be said of the country's roads, where death and serious injuries were once not uncommon consequences of traffic accidents. However, a concerted national effort has halved road fatalities, and cut by 80% those caused by drink driving. The figures for accident deaths last year showed just over 5,000 people killed on the roads—numbers that low were last seen in 1953.

A combination of legal, social and technological factors has saved tens of thousands of lives even as the number of cars has risen alongside the rapid growth of the elderly population, who are much more likely to suffer fatal injuries if involved in accidents.

The number of annual traffic accident fatalities actually peaked back in 1970 at over 16,000, before falling

throughout that decade. In 1980, they once again began rising in tandem with the increased total distance being driven by the population, going back over the 10,000 mark by the end of the 1980s.

The mass of statistics compiled by the National Police Agency (NPA) on traffic accidents can make confusing, and sometimes apparently contradictory, reading, showing as they do fatalities falling sharply while the number of accidents and injuries rises. Indeed, during the 1990s, as the annual fatality figure once again fell below 10,000, the total number of annual injuries broke the one million mark for the first time.

“One thing that is different from the way these statistics are measured in other countries is that in Japan, cases of road traffic fatalities are considered to be those who die within twenty-four hours of an accident. In

most other countries the time frame is thirty days,” explains Senior Superintendent Katsumi Ikeda from the strategy section of the road safety division at the NPA. Could this mean that the drastic reduction in deaths is merely a statistical anomaly caused by improvements in medical treatment that keeps victims alive long enough for them to be discounted from the road fatality figures? The answer, thankfully, is no. The NPA also keeps statistics on those who pass away within thirty days of an accident, and those have fallen at almost the same rate.

Strict Laws on Drink Driving

Two of the major reasons for the decline in road deaths are the dramatic drop in the number of accidents involving drink driving, and those at very high-speeds—considered to be over 80 km/h (50 mph) in Japan.

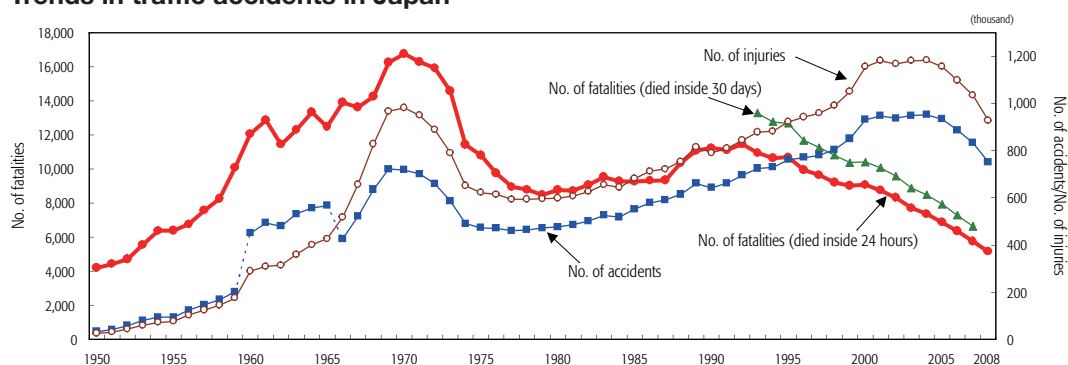
Up until around fifteen years ago, attitudes to drunk driving were surprisingly relaxed given that Japan is, on the whole, such a law-abiding and rule-governed society. In the event that drivers were stopped at the infrequent roadside police checks on their way home from a night out, a quick exhalation that didn't reek of alcohol, delivered in the general direction of the officer, was often enough to ensure a motorist's journey homeward continued without further action. “The truth is there used to be a real lack of proper breathalyzer kits for the police,” admits the NPA's Ikeda.

The law and social attitudes towards drink driving have hardened, and annual deaths due to such accidents are 20% of what they were in 1993. In 2002 the blood-alcohol level deemed legally safe to drive with was reduced from 0.25 milligrams (mg) per liter to 0.15 mg. By comparison, the average in Europe is 0.5 mg and is 0.8 mg in the United Kingdom. At the same time a more serious offence of drunken driving was created for motorists who were judged to be severely



Signs at the roadside showing the number of traffic accidents (top), fatalities (middle) and injuries (bottom) recorded by the police during the day in the local area (left) and wider prefecture (right) serve as a constant reminder to motorists and pedestrians of the need to be vigilant.

Trends in traffic accidents in Japan



Notes:

- 1) Since 1960, figures include minor accidents such as injury requiring less than eight days to be cured or property damage under ¥20,000.
- 2) Since 1966, figures exclude property damage.
- 3) Since 1972, figures include those of Okinawa Prefecture.
- 4) The figures for the leap year are calculated on 366-day basis.

Source: National Police Agency

impaired by alcohol, irrespective of blood-alcohol level.

The 2002 law was partially a response to an accident involving a drunken trucker who crashed into a car on an expressway causing it to burst into flames. A video showing the truck swerving erratically around the road, and then the desperate mother unsuccessfully trying to save her two young children from the burning car, was repeatedly shown on Japanese TV. Then in 2006 another high-profile accident occurred when a young driver who had been drinking rear-ended an SUV on a bridge, knocking it into a river. The two parents escaped but their three young children perished in the vehicle. Ikeda is able to identify the dates of these two accidents on the graph of road fatalities, by the sharper drops shown immediately afterwards, even before the subsequent law changes came into effect. It is the change in societal attitudes towards drinking and driving in response to these accidents that may be saving hundreds more lives even than the new stiffer legal penalties.

The resulting law change in 2007 increased the maximum prison sentence for drink driving to five years, from three, and doubled the maximum fine to 1 million yen (10,300 dollars). The penalties for anyone considered to have aided and abetted drunk drivers have also been greatly strengthened over the years. In fact, lending a car to someone known to be under the influence now attracts the same penalty as actually driving while drunk. Similarly, serving alcohol to someone in the knowledge they are driving afterwards now carries a maximum prison sentence of three years and

500,000 yen fine. The same penalties now apply for merely being a passenger in a vehicle, in the knowledge that the driver is drunk.

The first few court cases involving the new laws inevitably drew much attention as bartenders and passengers protested their ignorance and innocence. Ikeda explains that the authorities have worked closely with hotelier associations at educating staff in the hospitality industries as well as introducing warning labels on alcohol and “designated driver” key chains.


Driving and the Elderly

The reduction in the number of accidents involving speeds of over 80 km/h—down approximately two-thirds over the last decade—has been achieved without major changes in the related law. “The fact that the population of young people is falling has almost certainly contributed to the decreased incidences of reckless driving. Better road safety education has also played its part,” suggests Ikeda. Strategic police crackdowns on motorbike gangs and illegal road-racing groups have also helped make Japan’s roads safer places to drive.

With the fastest-aging population in the world, Japan is experiencing issues that other countries will shortly be facing. A growing population of elderly drivers—classified as aged over seventy-five in Japan—is one such phenomenon. Ikeda points out that, contrary to popular belief, older drivers do not have more accidents than younger drivers, though they are more likely to die if they are involved in crashes. In fact, nearly half of the fatalities in traffic accidents is made up

of the over sixty-fives—around twice the percentage in Europe or the United States. This figure includes pedestrians and appears to be largely accounted for by the large elderly population.

A range of measures including regular tests checking elderly drivers’ mental faculties and eyesight, have been introduced. In 2008 a law requiring an elderly driver’s badge to be displayed by the over seventy-fives was passed. “A lot of people objected to it on privacy grounds, and also apparently they didn’t like the design either. The law is still on the books, but we’re not enforcing it now,” says Ikeda with a smile.

Technological improvements in car safety over the years, such as ABS brakes and airbags, have certainly contributed to reducing accident deaths. Better use of available technology—the wearing of rear-seatbelts became compulsory in 2008—is also helping. Advancements in existing technology look set to play their part in the near future. The NPA is currently involved in testing a system in the Odaiba bay-side area of Tokyo that will send signals from sensors at road junctions, directly to car navigation units. The units will then give audio warnings to drivers, such as, “pedestrians crossing on the left” or “motorbike coming up the inside right.” Although the point where human error can be eliminated from driving hasn’t quite been reached yet, this is certainly another step in that direction. In the meantime, both the authorities, and drivers, can continue to work on ways to make the nation’s roads safer for everyone. 

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