

Improving society improves road safety

► 'Social capital' is connected to traffic incidents, says associate professor

DRIVING FORCE

JIL McINTOSH
DRIVE@METRONEWS.CA

Living in a tight-knit community has several advantages, but here's one you may not have considered: you're less likely to be killed in a car crash.

It's a benefit of "social capital," according to Matthew Nagler, associate professor of economics at the City College of New York, who says that public policies that strengthen communities could reduce

traffic deaths.

"Social capital describes the strength of connections that people have with each other in a community," Dr. Nagler says. "It's connected with a number of important outcomes, such as health, lower rates of teen pregnancies, drugs and alcohol, and economic prosperity. It's like (monetary) capital but with people invested in the community."

The idea started in 2000 with an article in a French newspaper.

"The piece said that we in France are just disastrous, people have no tolerance, we cut each other off, we're rude to each other

The finger

► The research included "the finger" — drivers making rude gestures to each other. In places where people "give the finger" more frequently, there are higher rates of traffic fatalities.

and we have a lot of fatalities, but people are more courteous in Scandinavia and have a lower rate of fatalities," Dr. Nagler says.

While the article was simply an opinion piece, it caught the eye of John Helwell, a professor at the University of British Columbia, who did a short study and

found fewer traffic fatalities in countries where survey respondents said other people could be trusted.

Dr. Nagler took this study to the next step.

He used over 10 years of data from 48 U.S. states, accounting for variables such as alcohol consumption and driver age.

He found that, in states and in years with higher levels of social capital, there are lower rates of traffic incidents.

"It largely has to do with courtesy and the way people behave when they feel they can trust other people on the road," Dr. Nagler says.



► Dr. Matthew Nagler

"If drivers feel that they relate more to other people, they'll yield at intersections, they'll wave, they'll be more polite, and that translates into greater safety. If you don't trust other drivers, you're more likely to cut them off, speed up and try to get to an intersection first, and you'll see higher rates of accidents.

"I'm able to conclusively argue that it's not just a correlation, but it really is the degree of social capital that

is responsible for the safety outcomes."

Dr. Nagler says that since traffic fatalities are one of the leading causes of death in developed countries, people should think about voting for beneficial social policies.

"If people are better educated, they tend to form stronger communities. It's a strong argument for education policies: spend that money to save lives on the road," he says.

JIL McINTOSH/FOR METRO