Northern Ireland (NI) (Figure 1) has a population of approximately 1,688,600 people with one quarter of these habitating in its two major cities, Belfast with 279,000 inhabitants and Derry/Londonderry with 101,000 residents. Of these households it is interesting to note that approximately 30% do not have a car. Besides this, the following statistics are worth mentioning:

- The number of vehicles on the road in Northern Ireland continues to rise. At the end of 2000 there were 730,730 vehicles registered, a 1% increase on the 1999 figure (720,645).
- The overall pass rate for ‘L’ driving tests in 2000–2001 was 52% compared to 56% during the previous year. In respect to these passes, 56% were male drivers compared with 48% female drivers. Sixty-eight percent of candidates passed the written theory test for private car drivers during 2000–2001. The pass rate for females was 74% compared to 64% for males.
- Between 1999–2000 and 2000–2001, the total number of road traffic injury accidents increased by 7%, from 7,827 to 8,361. Over the same period the number of road casualties also rose by 5% from 13,893 to 14,584. The number of deaths occurring as a result of road accidents increased from 150 to 163.

NI, as well as many other countries and cities, has had their fair share of road traffic accidents that have resulted in death or serious injury. Has it not come a time when people are just fed up with this slaughter on our roads? Many of the accidents that occur due to a ‘car crash’ are due to human factors. Therefore is it not obvious that to reduce these accidents we need to tackle road users and their behaviour whilst using road/foot ways?

During the 1990’s alone, more than 16,000 people were killed or seriously injured. The Police Service of NI (PSNI, formerly RUC) clearly points out that “since 1969 more than twice as many people have died on NI’s roads than have died as a result of the security situation”. Over the past 20 years (1980–2000) the total number of accidents has risen by 68%, from 4,982 in 1980 to 8,388 in 2000. Although the total number of accidents rose (68%) as did the slightly injured statistics (174%) and the total casualties (102%), the killed and seriously injured figures actually decreased by 25% and 25% respectively. The statistics published in the new year concluded that the death toll for the previous year really do make depressing reading, which many ignore. It is clear that attitudes towards being safe on our roads need to be changed and driving behaviour altered.

The situation in NI is quite alarming, with 147 deaths in 2001 as a result of the thousands of road traffic injury accidents (figure not yet finalised). The carnage on NI roads is not something to be proud of. In terms of fatality rates, NI is just below the EU average by 0.3 fatalities per 100,000 (DETR).

However, with regards to child fatality rates NI well exceeds the EU average by 1.4 fatalities per 100,000 child population. NI clearly has a worse road safety record in relation to child fatalities than most European countries. Compared to NI, only Portugal, Belgium and the Republic of Ireland have a worse record.

There were 6,395 road traffic injury accidents during the period April – December 2000/01, an increase of 9.4% on the same period for 1999/2000.

Sadly, it has to be said that NI has the highest rate of road traffic injury accidents per 100,000 population in the UK (Table 1). Even when it is expressed as a rate per 10,000 vehicles, the rate for NI is still higher than that of England, Scotland and Wales (Table 2).
Table 1  Rate of road traffic injury accidents per 100,000 population and 10,000 vehicles (Year 2000 figures)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NI</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Wales</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rate of road traffic injury accidents</td>
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</table>

NI has nearly twice as many road traffic accident deaths per 100,000 population and 10,000 vehicles. This is quite distressing when considering how small NI actually is!

Table 2  Rate of road traffic accident deaths per 100,000 population and 10,000 vehicles (Year 2000 figures)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>NI</th>
<th>England</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Wales</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rate of road traffic accident deaths</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Road traffic injury accidents during 2000–01 were mainly attributable to drivers, 81% and vehicles involved in road traffic injury accidents were mainly motorcars, 82%.

It can be deduced from statistics that the main selected principal factors of these road traffic accidents were ‘driver/rider – alcohol or drugs’, ‘excessive speed having regard to conditions’ and ‘careless driving’. For the period of January to November 2001 (December figures are not yet conclusive), the number of accidents and casualties are given in Table 3.

Table 3  Principle factors of road traffic accidents for period January to November 2001

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Accidents</th>
<th>Killed</th>
<th>Seriously Injured</th>
<th>Slightly Injured</th>
<th>Total Casualties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NI</td>
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<td>England</td>
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<td>Wales</td>
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</table>

From the table above it can be seen that careless driving contributes to a huge number of accidents, nearly five times more than speed. However, in terms of deaths there is not much of a difference between careless driving and excessive speed.

Many organisations and even individuals and non-government groups are striving to reduce the atrocities on NI roads. NI published its first road safety plan in 1995, which was established using the long-term casualty reduction target (set out in 1989). This target was the focus to reduce road traffic collisions; it set out over 100 actions planned by the departments, agencies and organizations involved in road safety.

All organisations have adopted ‘The Year 2000 Casualty Reduction Target’ set out by the government in 1989 and worked towards achieving it. In 1989 the Government set a target* to reduce the number of people killed or seriously injured on Northern Ireland’s roads by one-third, compared with the average for 1981 to 1985, by the end of the year 2000’.

As Figure 2 shows for the year 2000 there were 1,957 deaths and serious injuries. The target was not met as it exceeded the prediction by 24%.

![Figure 2: The Year 2000 target – fatal and serious casualties 1989–2000](image)

(Source: Central Statistics Unit, Statistical Bulletin 2/2001)

Fig. 2  The Year 2000 target – fatal and serious casualties 1989–2000

* The target was based on the average number of fatal and serious casualties reported in the years 1981–1985. The average over this five-year period was 2,362; therefore the target for the year 2000 was set at 1,575.
The government introduced a 10-year strategy, which incorporated many realistic goals, including the Casualty Reduction Target for 2010. It was unfortunate that the outcome of the Year 2000 Target was not met, however, the road ahead looks promising. A 20% reduction in the numbers killed or seriously injured has been set as a realistic target for NI to accomplish by 2010.

There are many organizations i.e., insurance firms and departments i.e., DOE (Department of the Environment) in NI who relentlessly run campaigns in collaboration with emergency services, in particular PSNI, to combat unnecessary death and injury on all roads.

The road safety record in NI is actually better than many European countries, despite factors such as, traffic growth, increase in one-car occupants and no major increases in public transport usage. There are many individuals, groups and organizations involved in road safety, which make a conscious effort to improve safety of all road users especially those most vulnerable. It is encouraging for NI to receive active involvement from many areas and groups in local communities i.e., support from the churches, schools, local government and the general public. It is reassuring to know that there is a lot of focus on the importance and seriousness of reducing road traffic accidents. The motive for a reduction in accidents is not cost orientated but out of general concern for the safety and welfare of everyone in society.

One important point related to road traffic injury accidents and deaths are that no one is excluded from the potential of being involved. It does not discriminate or have prejudice or display favoritism, however by complying with speed limits, observing the Highway Code and generally trying to be safe as a road user you are not increasing your chances of an accident.