

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Responsible GOVERNMENT

The area's greatest danger? Car accidents

Several shooting incidents in Pottstown earlier this month have residents on edge. Activists have called for stepped up law enforcement and more citizen involvement to fight crime.

We can all support that.

However, lest people think that Pottstown is more dangerous than surrounding areas, we should also remember that the greatest threat to our physical safety is car accidents, not crime.

Ten days ago, a North Coventry teenager, Thomas Andrew Kocon, pleaded guilty to homicide by vehicle in the deaths last December of two Pottstown High School students. The students were passengers in Kocon's speeding car when he lost control and it rolled over a guardrail along Route 100 in Upper Pottsgrove. Three other passengers were injured, one critically.

Less than a month before that, two Pottsgrove High School students were killed in a car crash on Route 724 in East Coventry. The 17-year-old driver of the car admitted to driving under the influence of marijuana.

These kinds of tragedies are far more common than shootings. In fact, studies have shown that car-dependent suburbs and rural areas are more dangerous, overall, than older small towns like Pottstown where people typically drive less and at slower speeds.

For decades, the number of traffic injuries and fatalities in America has ranged from double to triple the number of assaults and murders.

They are so common we tend to quickly put them out of mind unless they involve someone we know.

Just two weeks ago, a Douglassville motorist was killed on Route 422 in Lower Pottsgrove when a car in an opposite lane jumped a guard rail and crashed head-on into his car.

How many of us drive daily on Route 422?

A week before that, a Birdsboro man was killed in another head-on crash on Route 562 in Amity Township. The victim was wearing a seat belt. It didn't matter.

Seatbelts, airbags, and impact-

absorbing car frames have saved thousands of lives, but many fatal car crashes are so violent that even sophisticated safety devices can't protect the victims.

Most assaults and murders are committed by relatives, friends, and co-workers of the victim. In those cases, it doesn't matter where your home or workplace is located. Another major category of assaults and murders involves people who live dangerous lifestyles: They deal drugs or frequent bars where fighting is common.

The innocent bystander who is murdered by a stranger is quite rare — far less common, for example, than the innocent motorist who is killed or maimed by a total stranger

driving drunk.

I generally walk several miles a day through Pottstown, and I've never worried about being mugged or shot. The greatest danger I face, overwhelmingly, is being run over by a drunken driver or by a distracted motorist yakking on a cell phone.

In nearly 40 years in Pottstown, I've never known anyone who's been a victim of violent crime. But I know a depressing number of people who've been killed or lost loved ones to car accidents.

In the years I worked at The Mercury, two of my newsroom colleagues were killed in car accidents. One apparently fell asleep at the wheel and ran into a utility pole; the other was killed by a drunken driver.

One of my wife's fellow teachers lost her husband, an art teacher at Owen J. Roberts High School, who was killed driving to work. A distracted motorist crossed the median on Route 100 and ran into his car.

Three former members of Pottstown Council have lost loved ones to car crashes: One lost a son, another lost her father, a third lost his wife — all in accidents outside Pottstown.

The list goes on.

I'm not suggesting anyone should take the recent shootings lightly. Every effort should be made to safeguard our community.

But many people think Pottstown is more dangerous than the suburbs and surrounding rural areas. It's not.



Commentary by
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