

**AN ANALYSIS OF CONTEXTUAL FEATURES FOR  
OIL WORKER SEAT BELT WEARING IN  
NORTHERN LIGHTS REGIONAL HEALTH  
AUTHORITY (RHA #9)**

**Submitted to:**

**Joyce McBean-Salvador,  
Provincial Coordinator,  
Alberta Occupant Restraint Program (AORP)  
Edmonton, Alberta**

**Submitted by:**

**J. Peter Rothe PhD.  
Alberta Centre of Injury Control & Research (ACICR)  
School of Public Health  
University of Alberta  
Edmonton, Alberta**



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# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Members of the Alberta Occupant Restraint Program (AORP) requested information about the everyday life factors that are responsible for drivers and passengers in the Northern Lights Regional Health Authority (RHA 9) not wearing seatbelts.

## **GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The goal for this study is to determine key reasons for the lower seatbelt wearing rate in RHA 9 than in the rest of the province, with special focus on the oil- related industries. More specifically:

- To determine the relationship between peoples' reasons for not wearing seat belts and relevant local industrial factors;
- To determine the relationship between peoples' reasons for not wearing seat belts and relevant community norms or how seat belt wearing behavior relates to peoples' other behaviors; and
- To establish what lines of reasoning would most likely motivate non seat belt wearers to wear seat belts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Three focus group sessions were facilitated. One was held in Nisku with oil patch workers who travel to and from RHA 9, and one each in Rainbow Lake and Fort McMurray. Each focus group was comprised of 12 to 15 participants and lasted one to one and a half hours.

## **FINDINGS**

### **A. General Patterns**

#### **Typical Living**

- Workers in the oil patch tend to define their life as an amalgam of work, driving to and from work and preparing for work. This sense of work pervades the oil patch workers' social environment, and is more often evaluated as routine, somewhat dreary and out of their control. However, there is no longing to find different work, move away or seek another career. The excessive work is well rewarded, which provides great meaning to the oil patch workers.
- A typical work week is like a serialized existence whereby oil patch workers wake up, go to work, spend an hour or two with family if they are married or some kind of recreation like watching television or playing on the computer, go to sleep and repeat the same activities the next day. These typical heavy workdays are consecutive for about two weeks or longer.
- Typical periods of time-off also ring of routine for workers in Fort McMurray. If they have families that live in the city they tend to engage in more "family-

related” activities/chores in their spare time. The underlying theme is recovery from a tired work week.

- For single younger workers time off work is more about taking risks like dirt bike riding, spending money with friends not related to the workplace and drinking beer in the bar.

### **Typical Driving**

- Typical driving for oil patch workers is substantially less than that for many other professions, because on a day-by-day basis they live at or near the location of the work site. Some large employers have buses from town to the plant, which greatly reduces driving. However, time-off-work driving, after the probability of a two-week stint on the work site, produces a burst of high-energy long distance driving for the purpose of getting home or escaping to a city.

### **What Oil Patch Workers Drive**

- The oil patch workers’ vehicle of choice is a pick up truck. It best reflects their lifestyle and the image they have of themselves as workers and individuals. Although these vehicles are considered to be ideal for work-related needs, whether that is short or long distance driving, the meanings workers assign to their trucks extend well into the workers’ personal lives.

### **Receiving Traffic Tickets**

- About two thirds of the workers had received one or more traffic tickets over the last two years. The dominant violation was speeding. More importantly, having received multiple traffic citations was not uncommon. There were about eight workers who reported that they received two or three tickets, and five received four or more tickets. Two received ten or more tickets.

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### **Philosophy of Life**

- The experiences on work sites, the driving behaviors and risks that oil patch workers are or are not prepared to take reflect very much their self proclaimed philosophy of life – “live for the moment” and “live life to the fullest.” Similar quotes were heard repeatedly.
- It is interesting to note that the oil patch workers’ philosophy of life is basically to live for the moment. Yet, they spend an extraordinary amount of time on the job, working long hours and engaging in routine tasks. In fact, much of their life is work focused. Their descriptions of work life do not easily translate into life fulfillment. So it appears that their philosophy of life becomes invoked after the oil workers leave the work place. Perhaps then they are more likely to “*live life to its potential*”.

- It appears that the average stay with the oil patch- related company for whom participants worked was about five years or less. Some have worked for the same company for over five years, but they were in the minority. They were most likely to interpret their jobs as careers. Those more transient or having worked less time for oil patch companies were more inclined to define their jobs as work for pay. The workers came from all over Canada, most of them on a mission to join the oil patch for the lucrative salaries.

**The kinds of people attracted to the industry varied. One employee worked for a clothing company in China, another delivered pizza, and a third was a paramedic. Workers left previous employment like golf course or hotel maintenance, clerical work in grocery stores, warehouse shipping, trucking or waste management. One of the participants offered a comment that illustrates the workers’ desire to leave low paying dead end jobs in order to toil in the oil patch.**

### **B. Specific Patterns**

- A point made in the interviews is that the large plants have a greater number of employees who are constantly supervised. The workers on the rigs are more likely to work on their own, or they are more likely to have limited supervision, resulting in increased risk taking. Furthermore, they are more likely to be persuaded by other young workers to take risks as a sign of courage or manhood deemed proper for working in the “bush.”

#### **The Culture of Small vs. Large Rigs**

- The hierarchy of rig life goes something like this: the driller is the head worker followed by the derrick hand, motor hand and rough neck. At the bottom of the pecking order is the lease hand who does support work for the others. Generally speaking the workers on the big rigs are more knowledgeable and experienced than those on the smaller rigs. Also on a big rig there is likely to be a collection of older workers who have been scarred and injured. The younger ones on the small rigs have not yet experienced injury and they are raring to get on with their jobs regardless of risk. There is a different pace of life that brings different risks. Life is more likely to be laid back on the big rigs and “hell” on a smaller one.
- The smaller rigs create a closer knit group of workers that brings with it a shared attitude and normality, while on a big rig there are more likely to be different groups within the workforce and hence more of a chance for workers to be independent of small group pressures and expected behaviors. As a worker from Fort McMurray summarily said, “*the only difference is within a smaller group of people it’s easier to propagate an attitude.*” The chances of rig wide rituals are less likely to be invoked and expected.
- Small rigs had different rules of collegiality. The workers were typically younger, more likely to take risks like drinking beer after their shifts are over that create

pronounced cases of drinking and driving. The incoming shift presents the outgoing shift with a “flat of beer” to be consumed before they get back to the hotel or place in which they are staying. The change of shift is synonymous with a ceremony.

- The larger rigs employ mostly older drillers, who are also likely to take risks, but according to the worker above, the risk of choice is drugs to go on a “hell bender”.

### **Risk and Age**

- There was near unanimous agreement with the Rainbow Lake and Nisku workers that with age comes a decline in risk taking. Older workers are safer workers, but younger workers are stronger and more determined to work harder for longer regardless of the safety costs. However, the workers in Fort McMurray disagreed. They suggested that as workers get older they become more complacent. They get into a routine and by doing so they are less likely to have implanted a safety attitude. Whereas new young workers are scared and likely to check everything carefully before engaging in the behaviors, the older workers are more likely to continue in their ways without giving it much thought. In short “it’s tough to teach an old dog new tricks.”

### **Definitions of Risk**

- Once respondents began to articulate their points of view on risk they spelled out different versions of risk as it pertained to their lives. A number of them thought that they were “situational” risk takers. They do not take risks on the job but tend to take risks off the job – recreationally. Others are young and they take extreme risks as part of their lifestyle. A third definition of risk was directly related to work functions that need to be undertaken in order to make a living.
- Driving was invariably one of the key risk domains identified by workers. Poor road conditions, bad weather and potentially meeting fatigued drivers are major risks in their lives.

### **Oil Workers as Risk Takers**

- There are two main groups of oil patch workers, as there are generally in Canadian society – the married and single people. Hence the descriptions of self as a risk taker could be categorized into these two major groupings. Although there were fewer married men than single ones, they tended to lead a conservative lifestyle. They do not see themselves as taking too many risks because of their responsibilities to their families. As they described it, injured workers cannot earn money or support a family. It seems that having a wife and children has changed some of the men from having been prior risk takers. When these men originally entered the oil patch they were risk takers on and off the job, only to have become more methodical and safety conscious today.
- Risks on the job in large industrial plants are basically mitigated and controlled by employee safety policies and practices, which are supposedly enforced. However, the enforcement of safety policies may be more by formal definition than by the

working of day-to-day realities. This is especially true on the rigs where workers who disagree with tasks deemed to be unsafe will likely be disciplined by their immediate supervisor (push) or ostracized by the rest of the crew.

- The overall view was that workers in the oil patch do take risks because it is an essential feature of whom they are and what they do. For some the risk is real, but it is worth it because of the “big money” that they get for working in a dangerous job. Taking risks is a fact that is well known and accepted.
- Risk taking usually happens when rig workers try to take shortcuts or save time. The official standards are safety-based, but individual workers decide to take risks for a variety of reasons that are not employer related.

### **C. Contextual Patterns**

#### **Driving Differently: To/from Work, At Work**

- Oil patch workers drive differently when they drive from work to home than they do when they travel from home to work. Once workers leave the work site they are eager to get home and thereby they speed and take other driving-related risks. They are eager to shave time. And they are likely to be tired. However, when they drive on company time they are not allowed to speed. If they do they may suffer severe consequences like loss of job or probation. Finally, as a general rule most of the oil patch workers do not drive as fast going to work as they do going home. However that may change if they had been drinking in the city and they have to arrive at the rig on time Monday morning. They likely cannot phone for extra time off because of the pressure put on them by the supervisor (push) and the workers on the rig preparing for their time off.

#### **Impaired Driving**

- No doubt impaired driving is a major concern for the oil patch. Its risks are well known amongst oil workers. Although it is rationalized as a dangerous action, still it is a common occurrence in which workers participate after they finish work.

One group of workers suggested that there was a greater risk of impaired driving in northern areas like Rainbow Lake because the police are less likely to patrol for it, and that there was a good chance of escaping detection. To help deal with the perceived lack of police presence, one of the major oil companies operating in the area hired a special constable to patrol the lease roads in the area for traffic violations, especially impaired driving. According to one of oil patch workers, this act helped mitigate some of the impaired driving in town and on the lease roads.

A second group of responses described impaired driving as an issue that is equally prevalent in all parts of the province. The difference is that northerners are less likely to get caught by the police

## **Speeding**

- Nearly all of the oil patch workers admitted to speeding. It is part of the prevailing code amongst oil patch workers. They also recognized it as a major traffic risk in northern Alberta, because of the poor road conditions, tough winters and difficult traffic flow. Many slow moving large trucks ply the northern highways, encouraging drivers speed up and pass, thereby creating more chances for crashes.

## **Wearing Seat Belts at Work**

- Large industry employers have implemented policies that make seat belt wearing mandatory while on the job. This has led to increased seat belt wearing by employees working in large oil patch industries and for workers on large rigs operating in “the bush”. But even mandatory corporate seat belt wearing policies still produce behaviors designed to ruse the supervisors or managers. Some workers fake seat belt wearing when they pass a potentially critical corporate observer. Such action may increase wanton consequences like needless bouncing out of control in a work truck.

## **Dominant Reasons for not Wearing Seat Belts**

- Both the older and younger workers are problematic when it comes to wearing seat belts. Underlying much of what oil patch workers believe is the concept of fate, a recognition that older workers have successfully matured to a certain age because they have done things right. Their belief is that because nothing serious has happened to them to date, no misfortune will happen in the future. Hence there is no need to engage new behaviors like wearing seat belts. And therefore they are not likely to start wearing one at this time. For the younger workers there is the sense of power, living forever and the propensity to take risks. They are less inclined to wear their seat belts all of the time, if ever. It was at times referred to as machismo or “*macho bravado*”. But that changes as you get a little older and start looking after yourself. Other reasons for not wearing seat belts are laziness, stupidity and short trips.

## **Perceived Chances of Being Caught by the Police for Non Seat Belt Wearing**

- Generally speaking the chances of the police catching the local residents for not wearing seat belts are low. Some of the workers thought that the police have more important things to do than sit and look for non seat belt wearers. On a day-to-day routine the police are not as likely to see if someone is buckled up, and if they do see a driver who is unbuckled they are not likely to stop and ticket the driver.
- The conclusion reached by many is that because the police are not likely to apprehend and ticket drivers who do not buckle up, drivers are less likely to buckle up. The formula was shared amongst oil workers in all three locations. The participants from Fort McMurray and Rainbow Lake were most likely to suggest that the chances of the police stopping a driver for not wearing seat belts are zero.

## **Meanings that Workers Assign to Seat Belt Wearing Laws**

- For some workers the seat belt wearing laws have negative meaning. Some oil patch workers don't particularly care about the law and intend to continue on with their actions as they always had before the implementation of the laws. For others the seat belt wearing laws means points on your driving record and traffic tickets. These workers focused directly on the consequences of not obeying the laws. It appears that although some workers believed seat belt wearing laws constituted a violation of their personal freedom and independence, the majority do take the law seriously. But they tend to negotiate actual wearing according to different situations in which they find themselves. That is one of the reasons that most of the workers answered that they wear their seat belts 90% or less of the time.

## **Fatigued Driving**

- Representatives from AORP wanted to determine what factors contributed to the seat belt wearing rate in RHA 9. The study indicated that from the workers' perspective, fatigue was the greatest risk they faced driving in RHA 9. It happens to workers with such regularity that issue is defined as a high priority risk amongst oil workers.
- The work situation plays a major role in the presence and subsequent potential hazards of fatigued driving. Oil workers volunteer to work overtime for the extra earnings or because employers expect them to work an increasing number of subsequent hours, especially in the winter. This creates a situation whereby workers easily become overly tired and subsequently drive.
- Most of the fatigued driving happens when workers travel south on their days off. It is not unusual for oil patch workers to experience dangerous situations like driving into a ditch or driving on the wrong side of the road when fatigued.
- Folk wisdom plays a major role in combating fatigued driving. For example, workers roll down their windows for the rush of air, drink coffee, wash their face with snow, walk around the vehicle for a short period of time, run the air conditioning, smoke "*too many cigarettes*", use the cell phone non stop, drink bottled water or listen to a loud playing radio. Still, close calls or potentially dangerous driving situations happen.
- Given a choice between different kinds of risks on the road, most of the workers thought that fatigued driving is a bigger risk than impaired driving or speeding. Some of the participants detailed a concern about other drivers they meet on the road who may be overly tired. Fatigue represents one of the most dangerous driving situations identified by respondents.
- Fatigue is inherent or "systemic" in the oil workers' workplace context, whereby they work 12 to 14 hours per day in order to fulfill corporate expectations and personal desire for overtime pay.

## **Influencing Oil Worker Driving Behaviour**

- Married workers suggested that their wives can and do influence their driving behaviours. They “tell” workers to slow down, often in a vigorous and determined way. But, according to a number of oil workers, wives may also have a negative influence on the drivers. They tell workers to speed up, go faster and/or take risks passing other vehicles.
- Most of the single oil patch workers are determined not to be influenced in any way by women. Not being influenced was defined as a fundamental part of who they are – independent to do as they like.
- The answers pertaining to friends being able to influence oil patch workers driving behavior implied a dual meaning. One was negative in that friends in the vehicle can distract the driver. However, from a positive perspective, friends as passengers encourage drivers to be more aware of their responsibility to drive safely.
- Employers can definitely influence how a worker drives. But the influence is entirely confined to work-related situations, or the worker’s on-the-job driving behavior. It begins with “due diligence” when a worker signs a hazard assessment sheet. But work supervisors can also influence the way workers drive. As company agents, supervisors are charged to enforce company safety policies. They take the opportunity to approach workers and tell them to wear their seat belts.
- Work life on the rigs is different. Company policies pertaining to work time and pay may encourage workers to take chances. Some companies do not make it worthwhile for their workers to drive more safely or risk free. For example, in order to fulfill transportation need, such as having a pipe delivered quickly, a push may persuade oil patch service workers to take risks without offering them financial incentives. Another employer-related influence on the rigs is the shift change, where the incoming crew has to be on time to replace an outgoing crew. If a worker arrives late because of bad weather or driving too slow, those rig hands and pushes preparing to exit the work site are likely to become angry.
- Corporate policies dictate how much work needs to be done in the servicing field. Service workers are placed in a precarious position of deciding whether to take chances to achieve company needs and expectations.

.....**Recommendation**

- **Increased Enforcement.** Increased enforcement was denoted in two sub themes. One is that the fines for not wearing seat belts should be increased. The second is that the police should increase their enforcement at the roadside. Although increasing the amount of the fines was discussed as a possible strategy, some of the discussants reasoned that because workers earn so much money in Fort McMurray an increase in fines was not likely to be successful. They suggested more severe consequences such as the loss of the driver’s license for a period of time, or demerit points taken off the license. People will then take notice.
- Closely related to increased enforcement is a policy for buses. According to one of the workers, a large number of buses leave Fort McMurray every day. Yet the passengers are not expected to wear seat belts. This may be a fruitful place to

initiate a behavior change and to decrease the risk of bus passengers becoming injured in bus crashes.

- **Expanding Company Policies to Off Work Sites.** There was generous agreement that workers use their seat belts while they are engaged in company affairs, because in part of company policy that warns workers about potential consequences for anyone not wearing a seat belt in a company vehicle. Workers thought that a process may be implemented where the company takes responsibility to invoke that policy for their employees off site.

**Education. A concept typically mentioned in terms of education was video. Some of the workers believed that a video of the seat belt simulator, or one similar to safety videos shown by the company safety supervisors may encourage oil patch workers to buckle up in their spare time. The video should feature severe consequences for not wearing a seatbelt.**

**A Combination of Things. Some workers suggested that the seat belt wearing issue required more than just one strategy. It required enforcement, education and consequences or education, videos and lectures.**

- **Nothing Will Work.** A number of workers suggested that little has been done to date to increase seat belt wearing, so the situation may be all but hopeless.
- A dominant thought supporting many of the ideas and focus group discussions is the consequence, or the view that oil patch workers must be reminded that they can lose something important by not wearing their seat belts. According to some of the participants, something has to penetrate the worker's mind that a seat belt can save your life.
- More suggestions were offered such as educating society, building safer vehicles and improving driving conditions generally. These recommendations were general and had no specific relevance to Alberta oil patch workers.

### **Recommendations**

Seat belt wearing for oil workers does not appear to be a driving issue that can best be addressed from the worker/community perspective. Greater impact is likely to come from industry led interventions. It is therefore recommended that:

Oil industries provide greater leadership in their employees' seat belt wearing behaviors not only while at work, but also to and from work.

Increased seat belt wearing can happen for a variety of perspectives, whether that is increased enforcement/penalties, learning/awareness and/or specific corporate policies. However it can also become a residual benefit for interventions that address another safety feature which a target audience deems to be more relevant/important. This is the issue with fatigued driving. It is the number one risk to which oil workers are particularly attentive. Hence it is recommended that:

Interventions be introduced that target fatigued driving for the natural resource industry workers, which would potentially increase awareness of fatigued

driving and traffic safety specifically, with a residual knowledge component of seat belt wearing.

Fatigued driving typically happens after oil workers have worked for excessive hours per day (12 to 14 hours or more) consecutively for a period of two weeks or more. After their work stint is over oil workers drive directly home. They are overly tired. Hence it is recommended that:

Oil industry employers provide tangible programs that include safe rooms, sleep sites, etc and that make it mandatory for workers to rest for a couple of hours before they hit the road, or to provide incentives that are generous enough to motivate oil workers to stay and rest for two hours or more before they drive on the highway.

Recognizing that large oil industry employers require quantitative evidence to show that fatigued driving is in fact an issue with their employees, it is recommended that:

A roadside survey be initiated on major oil site highways, whereby drivers are requested to stop and answer fatigue-specific questions about the workplace and seat belt wearing is noted.

## **DISCUSSION**

One of the most intriguing issues that was not originally queried, but that arose from the research was fatigued driving. With little or no solicitation, oil workers discussed the problem of fatigued driving. It was considered to be one of the most important, feared high-risk driving scenarios in the north. Long work hours and consecutive days on the job makes workers tired. Then they drive home, often in very poor winter driving conditions – whether that is a short trip to nearby lodging or a long trip somewhere in Alberta. They become a driving hazard.

A secondary issue related to the first is that oil patch workers recognize and show respect for tangible driving hazards that appear in the northern areas. Logging trucks straddling the center lane on narrow treacherous highways, poor visibility because of snowstorms, other drivers who are suspected of being tired and/or drunk happen routinely. To help compensate for such dangers, oil patch workers are more likely to wear their seat belts.

It appears that when oil workers are in a lucid state of mind, and not impaired or tired, they recognize tangible driving hazards and they are more likely to wear their seat belts. The threat to their lives is immediate and it is acknowledged as dangerous. Hence the issue of wearing seat belts appears to be almost entirely utilitarian – seat belt wearing for life in specific situations. It is less likely to be non-utilitarian, or seat belt wearing for obeying the law or for a generally safer roadway environment. In other words, wearing seat belts reflect the “immediate” and not the visionary. Hence intervention strategies for increased seat belt wearing may be most productive if they reflect workers’ immediate fears of traffic risks like fatigued driving and northern Alberta roadway/traffic conditions.

It is interesting to note that the oil patch workers’ basic philosophy of life is to live for the moment; to live life to the fullest. Yet, by their own confessions, oil patch workers spend an extraordinary amount of time toiling at the work site engaging in

routine yet potentially risky tasks. By their own admission, much of their life is work focused, a description of life that hardly is synonymous with the implied meaning of living for the moment. It appears that once they are removed from the work site many are more prepared to “go for it”, engaging in high risk recreation, speeding on the roads, partying, and freely spending money. Their philosophy of life appears to focus on personal post-work time rather than an overall time span that includes work, family and self, the area where non seat belt wearing is most likely to occur.

Finally, as we reviewed the data we could glean on the existence of a link between employer initiatives on the work site and the need of an intervention for oil workers off site. This link could or perhaps should be further explored by AORP. Companies have developed a series of traffic safety programs generally and seat belt wearing videos specifically for their employees on site. But they do not or have not become involved in the gray zone – the time of driving between work and home, or the white zone of personal time driving.

It would be valuable if corporations partner with community agencies to organize seat belt wearing programs for off-worksites driving that are similar to programs corporations use for on-worksites driving. Videos, lectures, interrelated (work site and community) reinforcement of seat belt wearing, patrolling lease roads in partnership with local police are a few examples.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

Previous research pertaining to occupational health and injury and present research findings based on oil patch workers’ points of view illustrate quite clearly that the oil industry is actively promoting safety on the work site, whether that includes hand to job functions or driving company vehicles. However, as we previously noted, once workers leave the worksite they enter a grey zone. Industries expect or demand that workers put in substantial hours at work and do so safely. But once the workers leave the worksite and get into their cars the responsibility for safety is removed from the oil industry.

# **AN ANALYSIS OF CONTEXTUAL FEATURES THAT ARE EMBEDDED IN OIL PATCH WORKER SEAT BELT WEARING IN RHA 9**

## **INTRODUCTION**

A 2004 Alberta Rural Seatbelt Survey undertaken by AORP, reported that the average seat belt wearing rate in Alberta was 87.9% for drivers and 83.9% for passengers. The Northern Lights Regional Health Authority (RHA 9) wearing rate was 78.3% for drivers and 72.5% for passengers - a difference of about 10% below the provincial average. In fact this health region had the lowest seat belt wearing rate of all the Alberta health regions that participated in the province-wide seat belt survey.

The question left with AORP members is why there are significant lower wearing rates in the Northern Lights Regional Health Authority (RHA 9) vs other health regions. A number of hypotheses have been tabled. One is that the difference is due to the influence of the natural resource industry and the characteristics of people who work in the north generally and RHA 9 specifically. Secondly is that RHA 9 supports a large influx of transient workers that has significantly changed the norms of driving in the region. Also, young males working in the north, earn large salaries and engage in a machismo way of life. Finally there is the hypothesis that the north attracts certain kinds of people who enjoy living in isolation, taking risks, engaging in an independent way of life and challenging the ecology. Although all of the hypotheses have a ring of possibility, members from AORP requested more certainty as to which everyday life factors dominate. Furthermore, they sought more information about possible factors that are responsible for local non seatbelt wearing. Because the oil patch is a dominant economic, demographic and social entity in the RHA 9, AORP members were specifically concerned about the potential influence that the oil patch-related factors have on their workers seat belt wearing behaviors.

## **GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The increased industrialization of RHA 9 by oil interest has left an imprint on the local social, physical, legal and safety affairs. Accordingly, an important goal for this study was to determine reasons that account for a lower seatbelt wearing rate in RHA 9 vis-à-vis the oil – related industries located in RHA 9.

The following objectives support the main goal of the study:

- To determine the relationship between peoples’ reasons for not wearing seat belts and relevant local industrial factors;
- To determine the relationship between peoples’ reasons for not wearing seat belts and relevant community norms or how seat belt wearing behavior relates to people’s other behaviors; and
- To establish what lines of reasoning would most likely motivate non seat belt wearers to wear seat belts.

## **THE CONCEPT**

Seat belt wearing is not an isolated phenomenon and it does not happen in a vacuum. It is part of a larger social environment. Workers make sense of or assign meaning to their actions through such life tenets as acquired driving habits, routines and normal activities (e.g., speeding as an everyday activity on a northern highway), views of normality (e.g., their views on how they behave towards others in the community while they drive), workplace realities (e.g., corporate culture and the pressure of time), family and friendship circles (e.g., the social and physical distance between significant others and the young oil workers ), roles and patterns of behavior (e.g. routine risk taking as a part of life), life philosophies that are enacted in behavior (e.g., enjoy the moment and don’t worry about tomorrow, might makes right, etc.), and the images they have of themselves (e.g., self image of being an oil worker who drives a certain way and owns a certain kind of vehicle). We used this social behavioral lens to develop a qualitative research methodology. It allowed us to uncover relevant contextual variables that support seat belt wearing amongst oil workers in RHA 9.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The design and methods for this study were developed in the tradition of qualitative sociology and ethnography, which involves going to the source to gather information in as comprehensive manner as possible (Rothe, 2000). The most appropriate method for determining social behaviors and their meaning within different contexts is focus group analysis. Focus group interviews are designed to explore and document verbal behavior, attitudes, understandings, norms of behavior and styles of interaction as respondents present their participation in traffic through their roles, functions, images of self and socio/cultural milieu (Rothe, 2000). Focus groups enable a researcher to gain access to a group's perspective or way of life. The group of interest for this study was the oil industry – oil-related employees working in three Alberta locations - Fort MacMurray, Rainbow Lake and Nisku Alberta. The latter site served as a surrogate for RHA 9, in that many of the workers located here are/were transient workers in RHA 9.

### **Focus Groups**

To reiterate, three focus group sessions were facilitated. One was held in Nisku with oil patch workers who travel to and from RHA 9, and one each in Rainbow Lake and Fort McMurray. Each focus group was comprised of 12 to 15 participants and lasted about 1 to 1.5 hours.

### **Focus Group Composition**

Focus group participants were selected according to the goals and objectives of the study, the characteristics recognized to be important for idealizing non seat belt wearers and AORP's knowledge about characteristics typically found in oil patch workers who do not wear their seat belts. Each focus group consisted of 12 to 15 oil patch-related employees, who work and have recently worked in locations within RHA 9. The focus group participants were oil rig workers, plant/refinement workers, oil field service men, distribution or oil-related transportation workers and/or industry office personnel.

AORP members advised us that non seat belt wearing is a phenomenon predominantly found in males aged 18 to 35. The focus groups were consequently made up of male workers within this age category. Furthermore all participants had a driver's license. Although AORP members recognized that First Nations oil patch workers play an important role in traffic safety, their unique historical, social and cultural traits suggested a separate study.

### **Focus Group Recruitment**

The rationale underpinning this study is that young men working in the oil sector share a common view of work and life that is sustained in thought and action. Also, it was believed the issue of non seat belt wearing is significant to oil patch industries and hence they have a stake in promoting safety for their employees. A recruitment strategy was planned accordingly. We anticipated that oil industry safety personnel/management would become involved on the basis of the following assumptions:

- Oil industry management/safety personnel have a sincere desire to cooperate with AORP in order to increase seat belt wearing amongst their employees and reduce potential traffic-related injury and death of their workers.

- Oil industry management/safety personnel have a desire to increase seat belt wearing for their workers on and off the work site.
- Oil industry management/safety personnel have an interest in finding out more about their workers' points of view and behaviours as they reflect safety, behaviors and attitudes of work and personal family lives.
- Oil industry management/safety personnel are willing to partner with ACICR and AORP to create an ethos of partnership and collaboration in a research project benefiting both parties in the short and long term.

We originally proposed four sites for the focus groups. A number of oil industry management/safety personnel were contacted about these sites. The most forthcoming was Precision Drilling, and later Husky Oil. Despite their heavy workload, management/safety personnel offered to play a major role in the planning and implementation of the focus groups in Nisku and Rainbow Lake. Participation was not as easily forthcoming from other large oil-related corporations. Requests for involvement were often met with negative responses, or original agreements to participate followed later by silence, or change of mind. For example, a senior safety manager for a major energy company personally met with us to discuss traffic safety issues, and promised to become involved in the research, only to refuse to answer emails once he returned to his home office. A member from RHA 9 in High Level had difficulty organizing a focus group of workers from local industries. There was little interest. At another time we received consent to engage in a focus group of oil rig workers set for a specific date. The logistics of the event were planned jointly and the date was finalized with the corporate contact. Four hours before we prepared to leave on a pre-booked flight we telephoned the corporate representative to notify him of our arrival time and to receive final assurance that the focus groups will be engaged as planned. He informed us that the crew we would interview had left the RHA 9 site three days earlier. Workers were transferred to another rig in central Alberta. There would be no focus group session! The oil industry contact "forgot" to inform ACICR about the changes. Fortunately we were able to cancel the flights, although with penalty.

Still there was solid support. A senior officer for Precision Drilling and his management team selected a mix of fifteen workers in the Nisku area who had the characteristics needed for this study and who had first-hand knowledge and personal experiences with the oil patch in RHA 9. Senior management for Husky Oil selected 15 workers from their own company and some from Suncor and who had the characteristics needed for this study in Rainbow Lake. Office personnel organized the site for the interviews and they took care of local planning arrangements for the focus group session. Finally, a member of Wood Buffalo's Safe Communities in Fort McMurray organized available workers from different oil companies for the study. The oil-related companies in the area consented to minimal involvement. Hence the organizer only asked them to display posters for the session. They did so!

Focus group members received a \$50.00 honorarium each for participating, and a generous mix of food and refreshments were served at the event. The intent was to make the focus groups as informal as possible and to develop a rapport that would translate into personal accounts and life experiences without stigma or hesitation.

## **Interview Protocol**

The focus group interviews were intended to reduce the problem of getting information in generic or general form, as exemplified in the phrase, “seat belt wearing is a societal problem.” We sought workers’ personal accounts – their experiences, observations, thoughts and beliefs. We considered a series of themes or key questions that had been identified in previous research as ultimately important for any detailed and in-depth account of seat belt wearing. The basic interview protocol used is illustrated below. Minor changes were made on site according to the relevancies of the location.

### **INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

#### ***Location***

#### ***Demographics***

How old are you?

#### ***Coming to the Northern Industry***

How long have you worked in ( )?

How did you come to work here?

What did you do before you came to work here?

#### ***The Vehicle***

Could you describe what you drive?

What does the vehicle mean to you as an individual?

#### ***Typical Days***

Please describe a typical week in your life.

What are some highlights and lowlights in your daily life?

What do you do for leisure activities?

#### ***Risk***

(Working in the north,) would you consider yourself to be a risk taker? (Why or why not?) Examples.

Do you think that you take fewer risks as you get older?

Do you think you are taking risks working in the oil industry?

How does taking risks relate to working in the oil industry?

Would you consider yourself to be a safe person?

Do you think that fatigued driving in the North is a risk? Examples (This question was used in later focus groups)

Do you think that not wearing a seat belt in the North is a risk? Examples.

Do you think that drinking and driving in the North is a risk? Examples.

Do you think speeding on the highway is a risk? Examples.

How many traffic tickets have you received during the last two years? What are they?

How many crashes have you been involved in? Describe.

#### ***Work Patterns***

What are your shifts?

When you drive home after your shifts are you tired?

Does it affect your driving?

How do you stay awake?  
Do you have some drinks to keep you awake for the ride home? Examples.  
Do you wear your seatbelt?

### ***Driving Patterns***

When, where and for what distances do you typically drive?  
What are the main reasons for driving?  
Do you drive differently when you drive to work compared to leaving work?  
Do you drive/feel differently driving to and from work as opposed to driving for other reasons?  
Are you more likely to drink driving to work than from work?

### ***Seat Belt Wearing***

Do you wear your seat belt?  
What is the percentage of time you do not wear your seatbelt?  
What do traffic laws mean to you living in the north?  
Are you more likely to break the law in the North than in the city? (Coming home)  
Do you take the seat belt wearing law seriously?  
What do you think are the chances of getting caught not wearing your seat belt? Why?  
How would you compare not wearing your seat belt with drinking and driving?  
How would you compare not wearing your seat belt with speeding?  
Do you drive differently on site than off the work site?  
Do your friends or other people that you know in the industry wear their seatbelts?  
Examples of when they don't wear them.

### ***Rigs***

Is there a different culture between big rigs and small rigs? (Patterns of behavior, routines, habits)  
Are there big or small rigs in or nearby ( )?  
Do people take more risks on small rigs? (younger workers/more driving risks)  
What does Target Zero mean in the oil industry? How does it work? Is it realistic?

### ***Influence of Others***

Do your friends influence the way you drive? If so, how?  
Do partners (lovers) influence your driving behavior? If so, how?  
Does your company policy influence your driving behavior? If so, how?  
Does your push influence your driving behavior? If so, how?

### ***Values***

What is your philosophy on life?

### ***Making Changes***

Do you think we can influence oil-related industry workers to wear their seat belts?  
If yes what would you do to get oil-related industry workers to wear their seatbelts? (Low rates in the North)  
If no, why not?  
What would help increase the seatbelt wearing rates in the North?

## **Data Collection**

*All of the focus group interviews were held in the communities in which the oil patch workers were working/living. They were tape recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were spot checked for accuracy. The participants were reminded that their involvement was voluntary and that they did not have to answer questions that they felt were inappropriate or difficult to answer.*

## **Data Analysis**

All interviews were transcribed. Rules of action or categories of thought were coded, from which dominant themes and sub themes related to seatbelt wearing were produced. The development of the themes, based on a qualitative data process called analytic induction, was designed to describe young oil patch workers' experiences with seat belt wearing.

*Every sub-culture has distinctive qualities, norms and values that precede social action. Those distinctive qualities were interpreted according to lifestyle and behavioral patterns that influence young oil patch workers' seat belt wearing behaviour. Finally the findings were analyzed and reported according to the principle of saturation – namely that some themes dominated amongst participants. There was no need to list all of the relevant responses.*

## **Study Ethics**

The Health Research Ethics Review Board (Panel B) at the University of Alberta approved the study objective and design. A formal letter of approval was formally received that allowed us to proceed with data collection.

## **GENERAL FINDINGS**

### **Age**

The participants' mean age was 30 years old. The youngest worker was 22 and the oldest member was 35 years old.

### **Vehicles**

As expected, every oil patch worker in the study owned a vehicle, of which the dominant one is the pickup truck, whether it is a half or three quarter ton vehicle. The data showed it to be an all-pervasive choice. The principal make of vehicle is the Ford.

Focus group participants suggested that the large pick up trucks are expensive to own and operate. But, according to most of the respondents, they are worth it. The vehicle has intrinsic meaning that transcends work. It has a kind of profound and moral worth that is part of and apart from the purpose or use of the vehicle. It means more than transportation, or as one worker said, "*my truck is everything*":

- *To me, my truck is everything, if I don't have that thing running right and it's giving me grief, I can't get to where I'm going, I need it to get to work. I live down the back roads and I need, well I call back roads, it's probably a piece of shit compared to what you guys get at the rigs. I need it, to get to work.*
- *Mines a personal use...to and from work and anything else I do so it's my truck so I take care of it.*
- *It's obviously more transportation for myself both on work, at work and away from work so like I probably baby it a little more than if it was just a work vehicle.*
- *It's everything to me and it allows me to do what I want when I want to. I'm there with it...*

Although the cost of the vehicle is high, it is easily affordable. Oil patch workers earn significant salaries which allow them to own and operate expensive vehicles within an ideology of conspicuous consumption. For example:

- *You're pissing away six or eight grand a month, you might as well put a thousand towards a truck! Either way you're going back to work broke. You going back to camp without a nickel in your pocket. Whether you're blowing it on blow and alcohol.*
- *I don't understand, why all these young people working on the rigs, the guy, from when he comes back from making that big money, they got to go and have this fifty thousand dollar truck, why? Who can pay that off?*

Cradled within the “truck means everything to me” theme is the view that the pick up truck is important for work. It was defined as an integral part of work. For example:

- *It's a means for doing my job. It's what I use for work.*
- *Your vehicle is your pay cheque. You can get to work or you can't get paid.*
- *It's my source of work*

A review of the transcripts shows different uses of the vehicle according to sites. The workers from Fort McMurray were more likely to use their vehicle for long trips on weekends and for local trips that includes chores or shopping for groceries and hardware goods. They use the bus to get to the physical worksite. The members live in Fort McMurray and, based on their points of view, they consider this city to be their “home”:

- *Yea, kind of the same as these guys. I take the bus to work. Although, probably maybe one, one day out of five, one day out of seven I take a car from work and drive home and bring it back. And I drive to Canadian Tire a lot.*
- *I just get around town and to drive to Edmonton.*

Those living in Rainbow Lake did not perceive Rainbow Lake as their home. They drive to Rainbow Lake from other parts of the province in order to get to work. They do not use their cars for local transactions. Rather their driving is almost entirely long distance:

- *Employment. There's responsibility that goes along with a vehicle. But it's a means for doing my job and getting to my job.*
- *Just I need it to get here from home in Edmonton*
- *I use it to get to work, from my home, where I live to here, kind of where I live too, but not really...*

### **Typical Week**

The use and meaning of the vehicle reflects, the typical week that oil workers experience in their lives. For a week consists of work, rest in a temporary place like a motel or camp, and subsequent driving:

- *Pretty much you start your shift, you do your twelve-hour shift. You come to work, you're either, usually half hour to an hours drive to work, and a hour, half hour home, or at the hotel and eat something and you got to sleep and you do her all over again the next day.*

For those working in Fort Mc Murray, their typical week consisted of work, which in turn was referenced according to the bus trip to and from work:

- *Same thing. I get up, get on the bus like a prisoner, go to work, work for a day, get on the prison bus, and come back to town. The odd time I'll go in early and I'll take my own vehicle or have a vehicle signed out and maybe stay a little late the odd time as well. And then come home, go to the gym, and, come, and then go home, have dinner and bed time and go back to prison.*
- *Same thing. Get up, take the bus to work, start at 7:40. Sometimes we work past four till eight, it all depends, sometimes. Like right now they're working 10 and four on 12-hour shifts till August so it's you know, the eight to eight. And same thing, get home, eat, shower, get your lunch ready and off to work.*

As the speaker of the first comment indicated, the bus trip and time at work forms the basic typical week. He referred to his work as “*his prison*” – a challenging metaphor that designates loss of control, routine and confinement.

No doubt, work constitutes the baseline definition of a typical day. It was never described as a preferred way or a vocationally enriching way of spending time. It was always defined as tolerable, but not necessarily disagreeable. Work represented a kind of mundane and routine way of living:

- *Same work. Seven days a week, and twelve hours a day, home in the evenings. That's about it.*
- *Work ten to 12 hours a day. Hang out with a couple of friends after work for an hour or two, have dinner and go to sleep.*
- *Just wake up and go to work come home, wake up and go to work the next day. I sit there, play on the computer, watch TV or read.*
- *Work ten, twelve hours a day, go home, shower, something to eat, watch TV, play some cards. Maybe go out visit some friends.*
- *Get up and go to work! Come home, go to sleep and get up and go to work again.*

The statements translate into a serialized existence whereby workers wake up, go to work, spend an hour or two with family or some kind of recreation like watching television or playing on the computer, go to sleep and follow a similar pattern of events the next day. And those typical heavy workdays last for a long time:

- *Right now they're working 10 days in a row, twelve hours a day and four days off, but sometimes you do 24 days in a row it depends.*

Some of the workers manage time for the family and/or they engage in home ownership activities like fixing parts of the house and doing chores. This is especially true for those living in Fort McMurray and Nisku:

- *Get up, take the bus to work at 7:30 then I'm in the office all day until 4 o'clock when it's time to go home, take the bus back home and work on the basement.*
- *Lots of driving to and from work! But after that it's basically home and chores that's it and kids.*

So how might we produce a short catch-all phrase to represent the typical week for oil patch workers? A participant from Nisku put it succinctly.

- *My life is pretty boring.*

Others in the group supported the speaker:

- *Pretty much just wake up and work...*
- *Same as that!*

## How Time is Spent After Work

A review of the data shows that there is a consistency between the descriptions of spare time activities and work life. Both outline a utilitarian non-stimulating approach. The following expressions capture a sense of the mundane:

- *Yea, my life is as dreary as these ones, but I have, I also, I have a two year old daughter so, doing stuff, going to the bar, going to pub, library, stuff like.*
- *...Like weekends pretty much WalMart, gym, the movies maybe, um, wash the car, I like going to the coin mat downtown. My friends in Toronto would kill me.*
- *I have a wife and an eight-month-old boy and a house that's a fixer-upper. I don't have free time. Eat, make lunch for the next day, maybe watch some TV or goof up on the computer or sometimes I'm doing renos, like the last two weeks all I've been doing is painting and fixing stuff. And try and be in bed by like 10:30, 11.*

The major reason for the monotony and dullness of family life is the long hours spent at work. The workers are tired or they don't feel like doing much after a twelve hour day. Yet chores have to be done. The following responses deal explicitly with that iteration:

- *Who feels like doing something after working twelve hours or more?*
- *If I get home at five, I work in the basement, afterwards I have supper, work in the basement. But if I work till eight, I basically have a shower. Sometimes I get home at nine, so by the time you get up the next morning, it's almost time to go to bed at ten o'clock...If it's 12 hours a day there's not much time to do anything else.*
- *I work, I eat, I sleep, I avoid the parties and worry about bills. Then I work again...*
- *Um, my days of same things, just errands, shopping, I do some finance stuff on the computer, pay bills all that stuff. Take the car for an oil change if I have to, or whatever needs to be done, wash the car, go to the gym and then try to get out of town.*

Nearly all of the oil patch workers try to get out of town in order to escape their own versions of a tedious life:

- *Like I've been going back home at least once a month in the last three months. Or go to Edmonton for a weekend or something.*
- *...Usually every long weekend we head out to Edmonton for four days.*
- *Leave usually Thursday night and we come back on the Monday.*
- *I go every chance I get to get out of town...*

For the younger single members of the focus groups spare time is more likely to be enjoyed with risk taking adventures and/or drinking beer in the bar. The escapes imply out-of-town trips. For example:

- *Snowboard, dirt biking! I don't got no wife or family or nothing to lose, so I'm all out there for the adrenalin. If I can't catch an adrenalin rush, well ain't no point in doing it.*
- *I was younger working on the rig... That's where you go...to the bar... You go and socialize you been stuck with five guys for two weeks or more and you get sick of those guys and it's time for a break and so you go out and you party and you spend the money that you just made frivolously, with your so called friends.*
- *...Where do you socialize? Are you going to join the equestrian club? No, you're going to go to the bar in the city.*

### **Typical Driving**

The extent to which oil patch workers drive on a daily basis may be significantly less than that of other workers, because many of the oil workers live at or near the worksite on a day-by-day basis. Furthermore, large employers in the Fort McMurray vicinity operate buses from town to the plant, which reduces the need for daily driving. Some of the comments are:

- *It could be 20 kms one day and 300 the next. Back and forth to the shop or running around work stuff, town. Delivering materials, picking stuff up in the field*
- *Not much, take the bus mainly*
- *10 to 50 kilometers a day. Just going back and forth to the job site. Usually don't do too much traveling just to the job site and back.*
- *Some days it's to the shop some days a few hundred kilometers to the bush. Um, right now it's mostly to the shop, about five minutes.*

However, spare time driving after a two-week stint at the work site produces a burst of high-energy long distance driving home or to a city for escape nicely expressed by the comment, “...and then away we go to Edmonton...” .

### **Oil Workers as Risk Takers**

Two interrelated questions posed to the oil workers asked how the men envisioned themselves as risk takers, and if they considered themselves to take more risks than average workers? The answers could be categorized into two identifiable groups. Whereas one group represents married people, the second group consists of single workers. The married men were more likely to be a little older than the single men. They described themselves as having a more conservative lifestyle than did the younger men.

This group of workers did not really consider themselves as risk takers. Witness the following expressions:

- *No, pretty methodical. I'm not big a risk taker. I guess just as for me with wife and kids it, certainly changes your outlook on life. If you would have asked me five years ago the answer would have been different.*
- *No, I don't take too many risks myself either. I just can't afford to be. Got to come home, got to support a family. Can't afford to have anything happen.*

Being married and having children has changed some of the men from having earlier been risk takers to being more conservative at the time of the interviews. It was often said that when the workers first entered the oil patch they were single and they took chances, only to have become more methodical and safety conscious today:

- *With family and everything you take less risks. Yeah, for sure, with the experience that everybody has. It's pretty much one of them things you see more things happening around you so you kind of pick up on it more.*
- *I stopped drinking got married and that kind of quieted me down*

It seems that having a wife and children has changed some of the men from having been prior risk takers. When these men originally entered the oil patch they were risk takers on and off the job, only to have become more methodical and safety conscious as they became older and got married.

- *When you first started on the job it might be typical to be a risk taker, when you are younger, yea it attracts guys that are a little more risk takers probably for sure, I was when I was younger*
- *You have a family, you slow down too a bit.*
- *When I was younger I took more risks?? rafting and parachuting, and that kind of stuff but, you know I've got the motorcycle... like I've said it's a bit risky but only medium risk. Now that I have a daughter, less risk.*
- *With age definitely comes family and everything, you take less risks.*

Equally important is the theme that as the oil worker gets older he becomes smarter or more aware of possible consequences and therefore he takes fewer risks than he did as a young man. Witness:

- *Well, I'm not very old but I seem to take less risks every year as I get older so I get smarter and smarter.*
- *It's pretty much one of them things you see more things happening around you so you kind of pick up on it more. You smarten up.*

- *I took all kinds of risks when I was younger. Stuff I wouldn't even think of doing now.*
- *I'm definitely taking fewer risks since I get older. And I would definitely say I take a lot fewer risks at work because of the seriousness of the situation. But ya, even personal activities, sports. I'm not as likely to try a thirty foot jump on the ski hill now as I would have been when I was nineteen or something.*

### **Corporate Safety Policies and Risk Taking**

All oil patch-related employers have safety policies in place that stipulate preferred safety behaviors. However, the enforcement of safety policies may be more by formal definition than by the realities of day-to-day living. For example:

- *I would also like to add that there's a lot of times when riggers are trying to get back to their rig and the roads are bad and I think if it wasn't for the job like, if they thought they could get away with phoning up the push and saying, "Look, the roads are bad, it's snowing pretty bad, can't make her." You can't do that...*
- *When it comes to safety it's fine when you're not on a deadline or something like that but when you're out in the bush and you need to get shit done, and safety kind of flies out the door. I've put up derricks with (X) Company and (Y) Company rigs, putting their derrick up in the middle of the night with no light stands, we're all out there with flashlights, things are clinging and banging and you're putting up a derrick with pull trucks and...*
- *If you're the lead hand walking out there and you see everyone else doing it the way they been doing it the last ten years, you're not going to say anything because you're the green hand. You're the new guy. You're, you're just trying to fit in. You're trying to be, make a name for yourself or something.*

Members of one focus group discussed the issue of workers having the right to say no if the conditions of work or the assigned work task is unsafe. Although the policy on the worker's right to question unsafe work tasks is an inherently good thing, it can be problematic on site. Informal sanctions may befall a worker who decides to question a work task:

- *They just laugh at you out in the bush.*
- *Hey you can refuse out in the field, they can't fire you because of the policy but they make your life a living hell.*
- *They'll give you shit detail. Put you on a shovel digging trenches out in minus 40. Great! We need a septic tank over there, it's got to be 10 feet deep by 20 feet across and get to it, we need it by supper time! Well how*

*long are you going to be there? You're going to tell them to go get f...ed and head on to the next rig.*

It appears that risk taking and adherence to safety are different concepts for employees working on the rigs or in the field and those working in large plants near Fort McMurray. The ethos of the rigs is such that it is nearly impossible for workers to refuse risky work tasks assigned by a foreman, push or supervisor in order to save time or to promote production.

The Fort McMurray workers suggested that the large employers in the oil sands try to mitigate safety risks through steady reinforcement of safety policies and procedures. As a result workers are not inclined to take unnecessary safety risks at the worksite:

- *I'd say day-to-day we don't take very many risks, in the oil industry, with all the safety programs and all the processes that we have to go through all pertains to the code, and I guess part of my job day to day is to mitigate some of those risks. Most part it's not a big part.*
- *Yeah I think basically, compared with other industries I've worked in I mean just the safety programs are really ingrained in people, at least what I've experienced so far, so um I think you know a lot of times people are dealing with um, a tough situations in the work place or potentially dangerous situations, but the risk has been mitigated for the most part.*
- *Everything is very well covered when it comes to our safety policy so a long as you abide by the rules which our company sets out there shouldn't be any risks. There is of course inherent risks but everything is a calculated risk, with all the safety procedures in place to deal with the unexpected.*

But workers in Rainbow Lake suggested that they do take risks on the job despite safety policies, lectures or programs. Risk taking is an essential feature of who they are in the oil patch. For example:

- *Anybody that works around me is taking a big risk.*
- *I run a big bit and anything can happen, if you are near the truck you can get hurt.*
- *If anybody did this job with us on rigs you have to be a risk taker just to be there.*

The risks are inherent in the nature of the job and industry. They are worth taking because of the “big money” that workers receive for doing their jobs. There is an implied agreement – unspoken, that the work, although formally defined by safety policies is dangerous and that the high pay compensates for it. The theme is well illustrated by the following sample comments:

- *It's a dangerous job like it's more dangerous than most that's why it pays the way it does, that's why the guys are there for the bucks, they don't give*

*a shit about what they do. I know when I was young and crazy I didn't give a shit about what I did as long as you gave me lots of money to do it.*

- *You are taking a risk but you don't really think nothing of it. It's part of your paycheque...*

Others suggested that the risk comes when rig workers try to take shortcuts or save time. Or as a young man said, some workers are “*just taking short cuts and not always cleaning up the work area...*” The standards are safe but workers decide to take risks within the standards. A discussion on this matter occurred in one of the groups. A young worker explained the high risk involved working the boom line.

- *When you are straightening the boom line you got to unhook from your tie back or whatever and shimmy out on the end of your boom line one hundred and fifty feet up in the air and wiggle her back on there, and shimmy back, is that a, you're not tied in but you're not really ... for me you are a risk taker cause I wouldn't unhook if I was asked to unhook, I'd unhook and come down the ladder and I'm done.*

Another worker took exception to the above speaker's answer. He was an older married man who also worked the boom line but who did not think that he was a risk taker. As he explained:

- *I worked the rigs too and I'm not a risk taker I can get up the derrick, I can work the derrick but I ain't a risk taker to do me harm as I am walking over and to come down on the pipe or the blocks I mean that's the difference. For me you are a risk taker cause I wouldn't unhook if I was asked to unhook, I'd unhook and come down the ladder and I'm done.*

To which the young worker responded rather determinedly:

- *No! No! When you are straightening the boom line you got to unhook from your tie back or whatever and shimmy out on the end of your boom line one hundred and fifty feet up in the air and wiggle her back on there, and shimmy back, is that ah, you're tied in but you're not really*

### **Self Definitions of Oil Workers as Safe People**

Although some people consider the oil patch as a place where workers daily risk their lives, our research participants basically described themselves as safe people. They use their history of trouble-free work life as a resource for their assessment of being safe. As safe people they had never been injured or involved in an accident:

- *I never any lost time, injury or accidents so, yea I consider myself safe.*
- *Very safe. Yea, I've never had any major injuries um, or had any major accidents, ever.*

Others also thought that they were safe, despite the fact that they had previously been injured in leisure time activities. The participants interpreted the concept of a safe person in terms of the worksite and not leisure time:

- *I consider myself safe. Like I said before, as far as the risks, the only injury I ever really had was basically playing sports so, that's where I kind of say that I'm risky, so.*
- *I have a clean driving record. I have no lost time injuries. Most of my injuries are on my own time and my own fault,*

### **Definitions of Risk**

On the surface all of the respondents were able to tell us about risk. However, once they began to articulate their points of view they spelled out different versions of risk. A number saw themselves as “situational” risk takers. For example, they do not take risks on the job but take risks off the job – recreationally. Witness the following supporting responses:

- *Depends on the situation. Generally speaking at work or day to day stuff I'm pretty a, fairly conservative you know I just do as I normally do, but then a, if it's a something different I'm usually like, between like, my group, a group of friends back home in Edmonton like, I'm usually one who's the one who's going to be the, if not the first one, I'm willing to try something different or do, be the first one to go, jump off that or do whatever so. But day-to-day stuff I'm pretty mundane. But extra on the off work or on the recreation side of things comes out a little more.*
- *You got to follow rules because if you take any risk you'll be down the road pretty fast. I like my mountain bike going down the big hills, I've hit up to about 70 kms an hour on my mountain bike, so, that's probably the biggest risk I've taken....*

Others did not mention work. They are young and they take extreme risks as part of their lifestyle. For example:

- *I'll take risks. I'm pretty risky. I'll try skydiving or I'll try to do something that maybe is a little that not normal people would do or your average Joe Blow would do. Why not? I don't have a family so I'm in a position where I can do that stuff. Like last summer I went to Greece and I tried some stuff like cliff jumping...*

A third definition of risk is directly work related. Participants take risks at work. They talked about this:

- *I'm a little rushy and rammy at times. Well I get in there and I end up screwing-up working! There are times you'll go into do a job and you know you should do something first, and nine hundred times I can do it and one time you'll screw up and I'm the guy that usually does. I can go in first and not think about it and get someone else to catch me.*
- *Up until January 1<sup>st</sup> I always worked alone so it was very risky, but now they give me a helper it's a lot safer, so.*

- *Risk with heavy equipment... like slips, trips, falls, pinch points...*

The Rainbow Lake workers made specific mention of a specific work site risk that they face every day – H2S:

- *H2S. The wells up here are generally higher concentration... Up here specifically in this area, I'd say H2S.*

Some of the participants volunteered to speak about their driving to exemplify their risk taking. The following comment speaks to speeding where the worker drove over 900 km of dangerous road in seven hours. As he said:

- *I'd say yes (being a risk taker) cause I like change, like driving from Edmonton or driving from Rainbow Lake to Edmonton. I made in seven hours and five minutes once. It's about nine hours.*

The Rainbow Lake participants were most prone to mention road conditions and driving as key risks in their lives. There was near consensus amongst the interviewees from this site. Witness:

- *... Driving on these road conditions and stuff up here*
- *Yea, I mean kind of what these guys said that driving conditions and H2S certainly are our biggest hazards that, that a, you know I mean people down south are, you know, better road conditions, don't have the same type of hazards for sure.*

### **Risk and Age**

There was near unanimous agreement with the Rainbow Lake and Nisku workers that with age comes a decline in risk taking. Older workers are safer workers, but younger workers are stronger and more determined to work harder for longer consecutive periods of time:

- *Yes, that's my impression, I think the older I get I'll probably take less risks...*
- *I took a lot more risks when I was younger, now I, like I still take a few but nothing major anymore.*
- *Well, I'm not very old but I seem to take less risks every year as I get older so I get smarter and smarter and the younger guys work harder and harder...*
- *Yea you want to take less risk cause the older you get the more you see and the more you realize what can happen.*
- *There's a kind of reversal when you hear everybody say or talking about the young guys, not, you know, we're not pigeon holing them but for the*

*majority it's young guys that seem to want to speed or take the risks or whatever.*

However, the workers in Fort McMurray suggested that as workers get older they become more complacent. They establish a comfort zone, or a work routine. As a result they are less likely to be receptive to a new safety attitude. Because young workers are more scared or respectful of the dangers inherent in the work, they are more likely to check out things carefully before engaging in their tasks. Older workers are more likely to continue as is without giving safety much thought. As one of the workers illustrated, “*it's tough to teach an old dog new tricks.*” Further thoughts on the topic are illustrated below:

- *They (the older workers) get into a rut or they just believe it will always happen the same way. Uh the new people are the ones that are scared, their scared so their going to check everything twice and be very careful because they don't want to screw up. The old guys are like, whatever, it's always done that way, so.*
- *When they hire young people, they want to make a good impression, and they get exposed to this culture right away, so its embedded in their young professional experiences right at the start, where as like ( ) said these old school guys that have been there 20, 30 years, they're like when all these procedures come out, policies and they're like, Ahm I've been doing this for like, you know like, I'm an old fart, and I've done it like this, like you know, they've got that dinosaur mentality.*

### **The Culture of Small vs. Large Rigs**

Before major differences between small and big rigs are entertained a short description of the hierarchy of rig life might prove valuable. The classification offered by some interviewees goes something like this. There is the push or supervisor. Then there is the driller or head worker followed by the derrick hand, motor hand and rough neck. At the bottom of the hierarchy sits the lease hand who does support work for the others:

*It goes roughneck, motor hand, to derrick hand to the driller. The driller he's the guy out there, he's operating the controls and he's in charge, he's your boss.*

Trying to attain a description of the oil worker's experiences and thoughts about life and driving produced a short debate on the different cultures or way of life found on large and small rigs. The workers on the big rigs are more knowledgeable and experienced:

- *It's, it's night and day. They want, on the big rigs there's so much more to know. All the hands are so much more experienced. Like your driller will have 20 years versus two years or three years on a little single. On a little single you, you'd be drilling in and if you're there five years and you weren't drilling, you're doing something wrong. On a big rig, you're going to be rough-necking in five years.*

Also big rigs are more likely to be populated by older workers who have been scarred and injured. The younger ones on the small rigs have not yet experienced the accidents and they are raring to get on with their jobs regardless of risks. As a worker said:

- *I found the older guys they've all been there, done it the hard way. They've all screwed up their back, they've had herniated disks, back surgery, broken necks, backs, ribs, and if you want to lift something they were more apt to like, "What are you doing? Don't do that." And you'd be get, get help if you need it. Get a tugger or get a loader or get, you know what I mean. Where as on a little rig with the younger guys it would be like, F@#\$ it, you grab that and go get another rough-neck and just get it done.*

The smaller rigs embrace a closer knit of workers that is more likely to result in shared attitudes about risk and normal work life behaviour. The big rigs have different groups or cliques within the workforce. It allows for greater chance of independent thinking, and reduced pressures to perform before a peer group. As a worker from Fort McMurray summarily said, *"the only difference is within a smaller group of people it's easier to propagate an attitude."* The chances of rig wide rituals on a big rig are less likely to be invoked and expected.

- *The smaller one associate more of a team closer knit group of people, some people believe that brings a certain attitude within the group, like ah, in a very small company or group of people. Differences are weeded out very quickly. Like if you took all of us and threw us into a small rig or camp, where we all worked on the same rig, any one of us that stood out for any reason, would be singled out very quickly. In a larger company that does not occur cause people are going to mingle elsewhere...*

There is a different pace of life that brings different risks. Life is more likely to be laid back on the big rigs whereas it may be "hell" on a small rig. One worker described it colorfully:

- *The big rig's really laid back. You're scrubbing, your driller isn't doing much. On a little rig you're moving, you're doing 18 hour holes or day and half holes, you're hammering, you're swinging a sledge hammer every single day, you're drilling 300 meters an hour versus a meter an hour. You're doing a connection every ten hours versus one every 10 minutes. It's night and day. None of those older guys with all the experience want to be a little rig, that's hell!*

Small rigs have different rules of collegiality. The workers are typically younger, more likely to take risks like drinking beer after they completed their shifts, which creates greater opportunities of impaired driving. The incoming shift presents the outgoing crew with a *"flat of beer"* to be consumed before they get back to the hotel or place of temporary residence. The crew change becomes a kind of ceremony that incorporates a level of risk:

- *I worked on the bigger rigs where it's generally an older crowd and the rule of thumb is a lot of the guys don't drink and more. So if you're, you're in there with the guys that don't drink you're not going to drink yourself.*

*Whereas on a little rig where your driller is 25 years old the other crew would bring you a flat of beer just to get you to the hotel. And you'd pound back a flat of beer just in the hour drive and you'd, you'd do the same for your other, their crew. You'd bring them a flat of beer. On the older, on the bigger rigs where there's a lot of older crowd, they can tell you stories about they'd get days off and they'd do seven different drugs in seven days and go on a hell of bender. Now they're older, they're more mature and they got a family and something to lose, they're, they're not likely to, they quit drinking. Probably for a good reason.*

### **Rigs vs. Industrial Plants**

Another important theme that arose from the interview data is that the large oil refinement or processing plants have a greater number of employees than rigs. Workers are supervised all of the time. The workers on the rigs are more likely to be on their own, or they are more likely to have limited supervision, resulting in more risk taking.

Witness:

- *I think on the major sites here, its fairly safe with the younger workers, like say, you know, teach them when they're young. But I think on the oil rigs and that, there's a lot less safety, because it's not as much, there's not a safety guy there for a crew of whatever 10 or 12 guys, so out in the woods where there's nobody, there's probably a lot less safety for the new guys coming on. Cause I know a lot of guys that got hurt and stuff like that from you know, just well here, you know take this, they don't explain the dangers, and all that.*

### **DRIVING – RELATED FINDINGS**

A series of issues arose in the focus groups that announced driving as a significant component of an oil patch worker's everyday life.

#### **Driving Differently To and From Work**

There was significant agreement amongst the participating oil workers that their driving behavior is different when they drive from work to home than from home to work. A major reason pervades all answers. Once workers leave the work site they are eager to get home and so they speed. They are not as eager to get to work, unless they are mandated to be there at a specified time. One of those times is when workers are at the end of their time off days and they are expected back at the rig to replace a crew whose members are waiting to get home. Some sample statements are:

- *Like I say, you put in a long day, you're tired, the faster you go, the quicker you're going to get home.*
- *You're anxious to get home and the faster you drive the quicker you're going to make it home so we always keep the pedal down.*
- *Just faster when you're leaving. Slower when you're going to work.*

- *You're not in any hurry to get there but you're shaving hours off your, I don't know, you're, you're trying to shave hours off your drive time. If you got a 12 hour drive and you drive it half again faster then you're allowed to, you can get there half again too.*
- *Yea, you're anxious to get home and the faster you drive the quicker you're going to make it home so we always keep the pedal down.*
- *I'd say a whole lot more hurry on the way home then they do on the way out there.*
- *I've never, ever got a speeding ticket going to work, but I can tell you what, the first five years I moved to this province, I got a damn many getting home and some of them, you get the odd 20 kilometer over.*

### **Driving At Work**

Technically oil patch workers who drive company vehicles are not allowed to exceed the speed limit or drive dangerously. If they do they could be faced with serious consequences like loss of job or probation. For example:

- *I typically go a little faster in my personal vehicle than I do in my work vehicle and I think the biggest thing is that it's only me that has to face the consequences of having to pay a speeding ticket where you know it's if something happens in your work vehicle you know it could be your job right, so that's typically the way it is.*
- *I definitely drive a little more crazy in my personal vehicle compared to a work truck where I'm more careful.*
- *When it comes to driving for work I drive slower because, hey I'm getting paid by the hour so...*

But policy does not necessarily translate to practice. Several workers provided an alternative scenario. Knowing that they are not likely to be seriously disciplined for breaking certain traffic laws, they drive as they like. They believe that because the industry is experiencing a major shortage of skilled oil workers, it is highly unlikely that they will lose their jobs for a traffic violation:

- *Pretty tough to get fired for doing that. You can do just about everything wrong in the book, day after day and you're not going to get fired these days. Where they gonna find workers with our experience...?*
- *I doubt it! I'm not worried about speeding and stuff. Maybe a safety guy will talk to me...and then that's it...but only if I caught by the police and that's not likely to happen...*

## Fatigued Driving

Fatigued driving, although originally not considered a key focus for the study appeared as a primary or palpable factor for better understanding the reality of oil worker driving. It is present and it happens to workers with such regularity that issue is defined as a high priority risk amongst oil workers. Workers reported that they routinely drive when they are tired or sleep deprived and that while doing so they have experienced dangerous traffic situations.

The work situation plays a major role in the presence and subsequent potential hazards of fatigued driving. Oil workers volunteer to work overtime for the extra earnings or because employers expect them to work an increasing number of subsequent hours, especially in the winter. This creates a situation whereby workers easily become overly tired and subsequently drive. For example:

- *I think with young workers they don't have boundaries, there's a lot more overtime, so a lot of them will work a lot more overtime, so you get a lot, working 16, 18 hours sometimes, which I guess is illegal, then driving home, so I think they're exposed to a lot more of the longer shifts, fall asleep at the wheel.*

Most of the fatigued driving happens when workers travel south on their days off. There is a discernable matter-of-fact to the issue, a pervasiveness in the interview data, that is evident in the following comments made by workers from Rainbow Lake:

- *I pushed myself a lots, especially traveling back down south, to go and visit family and friends, tired and we all do it going home because most, none of us live here. We've all stayed here but our family and friends for the most part are down south, and, I've almost hit the ditch a couple of times.*
- *Oh absolutely, yea, I do travel lots in my job and you know, you'll work eight or ten hours and you know you'll still have four or five hours to drive. I used to work shift work, six at night to six in the morning and think nothing of driving you know, six or seven hours after that, right. And you know really, depending on coffee and everything else and the air conditioning and whatever else is to keep you awake.*
- *I've pushed myself beyond tired before to the point where you've got to roll the windows down crank up the radio and slap yourself. Yea, it gets pretty bad, I've done her.*
- *I've definitely done it a lots and it's just you, winter time you're kind of very lucky to be living in the north or where anywhere else that you can grab a bunch of snow and throw it your face and wake you up kind of thing. But yea, quite a bit.*
- *I drove tired before but I found just stop, get out and go for a walk around the vehicle for ten minutes and you're good for another half hour, an hour.*

Folk wisdom plays a major role in combating fatigued driving. For example, workers roll down their windows for the rush of air, drink coffee, wash their face with snow, walk around the vehicle for a short period of time, run the air conditioning, smoke “*too many cigarettes*”, use the cell phone non stop, drink bottled water or listen to a loud playing radio. Still close calls or potentially dangerous driving situations happen. As the following accounts suggest:

- *I fell asleep at the wheel going to Grande Prairie just over a year ago. I just woke up on the rumble strips there on the side of the road. I went towards the ditch instead of to on coming traffic luckily.*
- *I did it, I was really tired, I actually dozed off and I was driving. It wasn't really close but I met a semi, like I woke up and I got right back into my lane where I was supposed to be and the next vehicle I met was a semi. Like it wasn't a close call but I realized at that point, like after that whenever I was tired...*

Witness the pattern of responses offered by workers stationed in Nisku at the time of the interviews. Like their counterparts in Rainbow Lake, their fatigued driving is a prevalent part of their lives and close calls like hitting a ditch happen because of it.

- *I remember a lot of rig hands complaining to me that the PD's are not flying then and making them drive after a shift or rotation, you know having to drive home from High Level after putting in you know so many hours...*
- *Everyone in the, I know on the rig has said the same thing. Has got one story that it, that they did at one point fall asleep, hit the ditch, you know, they didn't all get in accidents but it has happened.*
- *Yea, I drove probably a dozen times half asleep like in the last six months.*

Some of the participants envisioned fatigued driving as an extension of a long workday followed by alcohol consumption, the combination of which makes it an extremely potent situation:

- *You could spend an 18 hour shift of working your ass off and be the equivalent of drinking six, seven, eight beers and driving home.*
- *I could remember working the rigs where I'd work a 12 hour graveyard and you'd have a 12 hour drive home and after six hours of driving you'd pick up a six pack just to keep you awake for another six hours.*

Fort McMurray workers also shared fatigue-driving experiences that should motivate traffic safety people to take note:

- *I was driving on my way back from Edmonton at night tired, or driving my way through Edmonton later. I've scared myself being tired, cause I've done it lots of times and I've driven through a red light before, tired.*

- *I've woken up on the other side of the road on the highway, driving on the white line on the other side. I've had friends waking up, when you're waking up your natural reaction is to jerk the wheel, and I've had people roll over.*

When the oil workers were asked to select the driving issue they believe is most dangerous and likely to happen in the north, they invariably chose fatigued driving. It was described as being a bigger risk than impaired driving and it happens more often. For one of the workers fatigued driving creates hallucinating, thinking that is worse than eating magic mushrooms, a drug noted for its power to alter a user's reality:

- *Being tired can mess you up. Like eat a bunch of acid or mushrooms or whatever you want and you're not hallucinating but if you go and you stay up for 24 or 40 hours and you go driving you'll be, you'll be so tired you'll be hallucinating thinking you're seeing a big elephant on the side of the road, just because you're so damn tired.*

Some of the participants detailed a concern about other drivers they meet on the road who may be overly tired. It represents one of the most dangerous driving situations:

- *I think tired is worse than drinking and driving because more people do it than drinking and driving.*
- *I think it's a big problem, here, especially with the drives to Edmonton, I think it's as big a problem as the drinking and driving. No it's bigger...*
- *You just don't know if the guy in the other truck is too tired to drive, coming into your lane...*

As was previously written, fatigued driving can be directly linked to the work site. Working 12 hours or more a day seven days a week for two or more weeks consecutively without time off creates conditions of fatigue. Workers leave the worksite in an overly tired mode, enter their vehicles to drive home in the vicinity of the worksite or worse, they head out on the highway to a city somewhere in Alberta:

- *You work 24/7 basically. We work seven o'clock in the morning to average seven o'clock at night 300 days of the year. Of course you get tired.  
No less than 80 hours a week.  
On average for most of our guys it's the eight to 12 hour range and the occasional day that you're working a 14, 15-hour day.*
- *There's a lot of companies out there that just, you know, like work they'd work us to the ground like 20, 20 hours a day for six, seven days a week you know, and it's, you got to watch out for these companies. You know these, these truckers and vehicle operators on the road.*

## Impaired Driving

No doubt impaired driving is a major concern for the oil patch. Its risks are well known amongst oil workers. Although it is rationalized as a dangerous action still it is a common occurrence in which some workers participate after they finish work. For example:

- *The guys I've worked with, that are that age, a lot of them are from a particular Province, I don't want to point a name to, but they get loaded constantly and drive.*
- *Yeah it's not right, but hell everyone does it, well not everybody, you know, but lots of guys...*
- *It goes on...It's no secret. You just have to look.*

We asked the participants to comment on the hypothesis that there is a greater risk of impaired driving in northern Alberta than in the southern sector of the province. The responses fell within two categories. One group of workers suggested that there was a greater risk of impaired driving in northern areas like Rainbow Lake because the police are less likely to enforce impaired driving laws and that there was a good chance of escaping detection. The following answers portray this analysis:

*Up here it is a lot more of a risk; basically the amount of patrol that we have is very, very bad. There's no police office here in Rainbow Lake. They have one stationed police officer here that we get terrible service from and when there actually is an issue with drinking and driving...In one situation that I had last year, I went to talk to the police officer and he would not come and investigate. So, word is getting out on the street that the cops are not going to come out and check on it any way. So there's a lot more people doing it around here than down south because there's a lot more patrol and a lot more risk and a lot more chances of getting caught and that's one of the biggest things.*

*They get away with a lot more up here and people know it. So they do it up here and they get away with it. So they abuse it, they go drinking and whatever. You know a lot of gravel roads you can travel on and if you happen to ditch your truck you're going to barely do any damage because it's going to go right to the swamp...All they do is pluck her out and do it again the next day, so.*

To help deal with the perceived lack of police patrol, one of the major oil companies operating in the area hired a special constable to patrol the lease roads in the area for traffic violations, especially impaired driving. According to one of oil patch workers, the innovation reduced some of the impaired driving in town and on the lease roads.

*One of the things up here that basically, one of the companies have actually put in place is having a police officer kind of patrol the roads, their own lease roads up here which actually mitigated a lot of the problems with the driving. The speed, the seatbelts, stop signs, drinking and driving. A lot of*

*it during regular work hours when you're actually on the roads. After hours is one of those things that was actually still kept up because he was working the same hours that we were. It was a special constable.*

The second category of responses described impaired driving as an issue that is equally prevalent in all parts of the province. The difference is that northerners are less likely to get caught by the police:

*The risk is the same everywhere. It happens all over, but the potential of getting caught I think is a lot less.*

*I don't think you're going to get caught up here as much as you would down south.*

*I wouldn't say it's any more of a risk up here than it is any where else. It's just a huge risk in general so. It's no more so up here.*

### **Speeding**

Speeding is universal. Nearly all of the oil patch workers admitted to doing it. They also recognized it as a major traffic risk in northern Alberta, because of the poor road conditions, tough winters and difficult traffic flow. Many slow moving large trucks ply the northern highways; encouraging other drivers to speed up and pass, thereby creating more chances for crashes. Some sample comments are:

- *I'd say speed is a big factor cause this highway between here and High Level cause it's probably the worst highway in Alberta and if you speed on that highway it's just the further you're going to go in the bush.*
- *Oh, definitely. Especially up here with the high, high volume of traffic, logging trucks, wide loads. You speed down the highway you meet a semi with a D8 coming off the side of it, you know I what mean, and all of a sudden you see it and next thing you know you're freaked out because you see this big blade or wide load and off the shoulder of the road you go and next thing you know you're in the ditch*

Still speeding tends to be part of the prevailing code amongst oil patch workers. As we described previously, there is no finessing the fact that speeding is a universally practiced driving action in which oil patch workers engage when they head home somewhere in Alberta:

- *I've been usually speeding because I'm always late for where ever I'm going*
- *I'd say I do a whole lot more speeding on the way home than on the way out there.*
- *I try not to break the speed limit, but then again, I mean if I can get home 10 minutes early that's 10 minutes I got, you know, to fool around with the house, play with the kids... and do chores*

- *When I'm going on holidays I tend to speed more... just to get down south to get away from here to enjoy myself.*

### **Wearing Seat Belts Overall**

A clear majority of the participants answered that they wear their seat belts. The question was straight forward. The answers were an uncompromising yes. Workers wore their seat belts virtually all of the time:

- *Absolutely every time I get in , and the point is when I drive from my driveway around to my front they say the biggest part of accidents is like five minutes away from your house right?*
- *Even just going around the block I don't know what's going to happen, going around the block I always, always before that thing goes in gear now my seatbelt's on.*
- *I wear mine one hundred percent of the time even at redundant times, if you are in the yard and you are on call and you open up the gate and hot shot that and you have to drive and then lock the gate, it's natural, you hop in the drive and you slap on the belt and you drive to the gate and like I take my belt off to open the gate.*
- *One hundred percent of the time, if anybody is coming in the vehicle I don't like going anywhere without everybody having their seatbelt on, especially with the kids and everybody else that you got, the vehicle don't even move unless their seatbelt is on.*

But as the discussions continued, compromises slipped into the talk. Seat belt wearing happened, but not all of the time. The extent of buckling up decreased as conditions and excuses were given to legitimize none wearing. For example:

- *I'd say probably 60-70% of the time. If I remember at all to put it on, if I think about it.*
- *Probably about 60%. It all depends if it's dangerous to drive, like if you're tired along the ways, I wear it.*
- *A lot of it is location. Out on lease roads and stuff it's similar. Nobody's around so you don't wear them.*
- *If I'm just in or around town or something like that, a five minute drive or something.*
- *Mostly in the passenger seat that I won't put it on.*
- *Oh um, on site there's no question, but off site I couldn't tell ya.*

- *I don't always wear my seatbelt that often, especially on the gravel roads I drive because they choke you out. They damn near choke you out. So unless I'm on the main road, on the gravel roads I usually don't wear it.*

A rule of thumb for the Rainbow Lake oil patch workers appears to be that if hazardous driving conditions exist, they are more likely to wear seat belts. Their perception of immediate danger acts as a key motivator for buckling up. It is pure pragmatics. Hazardous driving conditions like extremely poor road conditions, bad winter weather and numerous logging trucks that hug the center lane translate into potential harm. From this standpoint, direct here-and-now danger may lead directly to seat belt wearing:

- *The traffic count on highway 58. Our traffic is ridiculous. You know, it's a, per capita it's as busy, if not busier, than the Fort Mac highway and our traffic isn't cars and half tons, it's logging trucks, every 20 seconds you're meeting a logging truck, very heavy heavy equipment*
- *Well, the logging trucks are a big issue here. Like, they stick to the centre of the road. It's easier for us to get out of the way than one of them so they've got a tendency to hug the centre of the road as much as they can. So, I think if you've got your seatbelt on it's definitely could save your life or your friends or whatever's in with you if you have to pull out in the ditch or something to save yourself instead from hitting the front of a truck.*
- *There's just more potential to roll vehicles or just smacking into a bank of snow. You could go through the windshield or you know, plow your head into the dash a lot easier. It doesn't take too much really, so.*
- *About the same, road conditions, heavy equipment, bigger trucks. Like I touched on before, inexperienced fatigued drivers. You've got to watch out for everything.*
- *Yea, you should wear your seatbelt. Especially our highway that's got no sides on it. If you go over the white line, you've got four inches and you're in the ditch. Flying trucks on Stage road going in the wrong lane. Like going out this morning and coming back this evening there, they'd be on the yellow line.*
- *I find I wear my seatbelt more in the winter up here and the condition of the roads in the winter.*

The issue of wearing seat belts appears to be almost entirely utilitarian, namely that seat belts are used if or when there are perceived dangerous driving circumstances. The workers spoke little about seat belt wearing as a habit that transcends traffic situations and circumstances.

## **Wearing Seat Belts at Work**

Based on the focus group discussions, large industrial employers have policies that mandate seat belt wearing for workers who drive company vehicles or who travel for on-the-job-related duties. There is a perception that such policies had increased work-related seat belt wearing in Fort McMurray industrial sites and for large oil rig workers who toil in different parts of the province:

- *It's becoming more prevalent now. Now that the company itself is making it an issue. Some of the drillers and some of the supervisors are, if, if they're driving with you they'll, they'll remind you. But like four years ago, or I guess eight years ago, I remember driving on lease roads with the whole crew of guys and nobody with their seatbelt on. It wasn't in your face yet to wear your seatbelt.*

Even though success may be enhanced with the enforcement of strict seat belt wearing policies, some workers indicated that they practice defiance by pulling a ruse on pushes, supervisors or managers. They fake seat belt wearing when they pass a critical corporate observer. Such action may increase wanton consequences like needless body bouncing and head smashing in a fast traveling work truck. As described by the following worker:

- *I worked the rig and we would all pull the seatbelt over your shoulder when we're going past the pusher shack and it would be routine and we'd all, the whole crew would be smashing your head off the roof taking jumps in the crew truck on the way back. Or just hauling ass and you'd be smashing the roof with your head on the roof.*

### **Dominant Reasons for not Wearing Seat Belts**

Failure to wear seat belts is not restricted to young workers. Participants suggested that it also involves older workers, who tend to reference their lives according to fate. Their belief is that because nothing serious has happened to them to date, no misfortune will likely happen in the future. Hence there is no need to engage new behaviors like wearing seat belts. Witness:

- *A lot of the older, the older people do it and they think well, "I'm 50 years old damn it, what are you doing telling me to wear my seatbelt and I made it this far? It would have happened by now.*
- *They've been on the rig roads for 20 years and nothings ever happened and they don't think anything will happen. So why wear seat belts?*

Self empowerment is the key for younger workers not wearing their seat belts. They don't want anyone to tell them what to do. Furthermore they are more likely to take risks because they believe that they are immortal. They will live forever. This view is in rhythm with behaviour that reflects machismo, or as some of the workers called it, "*macho bravado*".

But the feeling of omnipotence changes as the workers get a little older. They are more likely to start looking after themselves:

*The biggest thing is your mentality, right. When I was 21 I was invincible still. Now I'm 35 and I know I'm getting old and if I don't start looking after myself I'm going to be a crippled up piece of shit when I turn 50. But to think like a 35 year old when you're 21 is a pretty hard thing to do. And the only way you could make that change a bit is by educating people enough and to educate them enough takes a long time. It took a lot of years at working at it and getting the seatbelt shit shoved down your throat till one day you go, "Oh, that makes sense!"*

Other reasons for not wearing seat belts were laziness, stupidity and short trips:

- *Laziness and stupidity are the reasons for now wearing seat belts.*
- *I'll find myself; on occasion just uh if it's just a 2-minute drive then sometimes I won't wear my belt.*
- *If I have to leave to get onto 63 or get downtown my corner downtown then yea it goes on but, if it's a one minute drive then...*

### **Chances of Being Caught by the Police for Not Wearing Seat Belts**

The police are a major focus of traffic safety. However, most workers in the study reported that there is a minimal chance of being apprehended by the police for not wearing seat belts. A number of reasons prevail. One Fort McMurray worker suggested that the police have more important things to do than sit and look for non seat belt wearers:

- *Pretty small (chances of getting caught for not wearing your seat belt). I actually think there are other problems that the police could focus on in this town as opposed to trying to catch normally law abiding citizens not wearing seat belts.*

Furthermore it is difficult for the police to spot a driver who is not wearing his seat belt, making seat belt violations difficult to enforce:

- *I don't think they, like a police car drives by you going the opposite way, they're not going to be able to be paying attention to you whether you're wearing a seat belt or not. If they have a check stop...usually you see a check stop before they'll see you and that gives you an opportunity to put it on. But I, I think seat belts is a very, very hard thing to control. It's a very easy thing to fight so I don't think it's, you're chances of being caught is slim to none.*
- *I've been pulled over, like before I had a company vehicle or whatever, I've been pulled over three or four times without a seatbelt and I could always get it on before the cop would walk up and they'd never ever give me a ticket for it. You could always get it on before the cop would come up and notice it, always.*

Some workers indicated that the odds of getting caught for not wearing a seat belt increases if the police engage random roadside checks. However, on a traditional day-to-day basis the police are unlikely to see if someone is buckled up, and if they do see a driver who is unbuckled they are not likely to stop and ticket the driver.

- *I'd say the chances aren't zero. Every once in a while the cops will trade like a week though, or a week they'll just concentrate on seat belts and be parked along residential areas. You're chances then are pretty good if they're actually targeting that. But if they're not targeting it, you can pass a police officer not wearing a seatbelt, even look at him, he's not going to turn on his lights.*
- *You're not going to get caught. No. No. And I'm a big believer in that and I don't care what anybody says. They can't even stop people from speeding in this town.*

A conclusion reached by a number of participants is that because the police in the north are unlikely to apprehend and cite drivers for not wearing seat belts, drivers are less willing to buckle up. The conclusion was shared amongst oil workers in all three locations.

### **Meanings that Workers Assign to Seat Belt Wearing Laws**

Rather than focus entirely on the practical side of seat belt wearing, we expanded the theme to include meanings that workers assign to seat belt wearing laws. The extended view is based on the assumption that people behave according to their meanings.

As we expected, meanings towards seat belt laws varied. No one meaning seemed to take higher priority or have greater impact than any other. Some workers viewed seat belt laws in a negative way. They don't care much about the law and intend to continue on with their actions as they had before the law was implemented:

- *I think that the fact that it's the law, it might get a few lot of people that are too cheap, who don't want to be caught or something like that that might make those kind of people do it. But for myself personally, I couldn't give a shit whether it's the law now. I know when it first came out I was really pissed off about it but now it's a personal choice I make.*
- *The law don't make a difference. No, it's my personal life. I'll do what I want.*
- *It's personal choice, hey! Especially up here...*

For others the seat belt wearing laws meant points on their driving records and traffic tickets. The interviewees focused on the consequences of for those who do not obey the law. The following statement best summarizes the feeling:

- *Big ticket! And points! There is points in Alberta for that.*

From a positive meaning point of view, most of the oil patch workers thought that the seat belt law was a critical attempt at controlling driving risk. They take the law seriously. Yet, they are willing to negotiate the law according to different situations and circumstances in which they find themselves. They believe that they are abiding by the spirit of the law when they wear their seat belts 90% or less of the time.

### **Receiving Traffic Tickets**

A simple question was posed to the participants. How many traffic tickets have you received during the last two years?

About two thirds of the workers said that they had received one or more moving traffic violations. The dominant one was for speeding. More importantly there were eight workers who reported that they received two to three tickets, and five received four or more. Two people conceded that they received ten or more tickets. The drama of the multiple tickets can be personalized with the following quote:

- *Before this job, like I haven't really sped really, since I got this job, since it's company wheels, but before that, ooohhh god. I lost my license three times, stood up in front of the judge, had Mom and Dad there, and ya. I pleaded guilty to going to jail for a week and had a good lawyer and didn't go to jail so I think/ I paid probably five grand in speeding tickets.*

### **Major Influences on Driving**

A question we asked of participants is, "Can anyone influence the driving of oil patch workers, who may have a strong sense of independence?" Their collective answer was yes. But the persons deemed to be most influential differed.

**Wives.** Married workers suggested that their wives can and do influence their driving behaviours. They "tell" workers to slow down, often in a vigorous and determined way:

- *A lot of times my wife will usually do that back seat driver sort of thing, will point out things. This is great! You know, maybe you didn't see a sign or something you know the little ones that change speed or a lot of times coming to town she'll remind me that it's 70 right where the photo radar guy is.*
- *My wife has a positive influence on my driving.*
- *Oh, yea I get lots of ideas on how to drive. She tells me slow the hell down....*
- *Mine does. Yes. She tells you to slow down, you got to slow down man. She's screaming in your ear.*

But, according to a number of oil workers, wives may also have a negative influence on the drivers. They tell workers to speed up, go faster and/or take risks passing other vehicles. For example:

- *I'm the opposite because my wife complains I drive slow.*
- *Yea. Just when we're driving down south. The only time we spend in the vehicle is when we're driving down south. She's giving me directions to the highway. She's telling me "oh, speed up. Pass this guy. Pass this guy."*
- *For me usually my wife tells me to speed cause if I drive 110, 115, she says, "No, no, you can go 120, 125." I'm like "Ya, but you're not getting the ticket, I am." And in town like she'll remind me it's going 70 here, which I usually know, but it's like kind of like the back seat driver. She's usually pretty good though she, I don't know, on the long drive she tends to "oh, you know cruise control."*

### **Single Workers**

Most of the single oil patch workers are determined not to be influenced by women. It is part of them being single in the first place. Not being influenced was defined as a fundamental part of who they are – independent to do as they like:

- *I'm a single man, I drive the way I want. That's the way it is...*
- *Well I'm a single man so I just drive the way I like to, so.*

### **Friends**

The answers pertaining to friends being able to influence oil patch workers driving behavior implied a dual meaning. One was negative in that friends in the vehicle can distract the driver. However, from a positive perspective, friends as passengers encourage drivers to be more aware of their responsibility to drive safely:

- *Yes. Somebody's in the car, it's, much more, you're much more about you're trying to be much more aware. Granted on the same note though, there are more distractions.*
- *They influence it both ways. Like now it influences me in a sense that they're my responsibility so I'm more careful when I have passengers. But in the past it was sort of a negative thing where you be know, like Greg, or whoever was driving "You're driving so slow." But now of course like you know when people are in my car they're my responsibility so it definitely affects the way I drive.*

### **Employers**

Employers can definitely influence workers' driving behavior. But the influence is confined entirely to work-related situations, or the worker's on-the-job driving behavior. It begins with "due diligence" when a worker signs a hazard assessment sheet:

*Basically you sign a tailgate and a hazard assessment every morning and on that documentation basically it says that this is a hazardous job and this is what*

*you do to mitigate them so if they're, if it says on there to wear your seatbelts or driving to and from lease is one of the biggest hazards you have and normally on our hazard assessment that's always the first thing listed (seatbelt) and being's that you're signed your name to it basically saying that you're aware of the hazards so basically you know take care when you're doing it, right.*

Due diligence is part of a company policy, which “can” play a substantial role in how workers drive on the job:

*Company policy keeps my driving very strict. Just obeying the laws at all times.*

*I think if nothing else the policies keep me in check a little bit. More apt to a ( ) to follow procedures all the time, you know what I mean. That's the kind of guy I am.*

*Yea, company policies definitely influence it because I can probably handle probably getting a \$200 ticket from a cop, but if there's a chance you might lose your job, so it's a far cry from \$200, so.*

But work supervisors can also influence the way workers drive. As company agents, supervisors are charged to enforce company safety policies. They may take the opportunity to approach workers and remind them about traffic laws generally and the importance of seat belt wearing specifically. For example:

- *We've all been talked to. We've all been told we should be wearing our seatbelt.*
- *I'm one of them - a supervisor. I mean I've had guys come up to me and say, "Hey, you should wear your seatbelt." And that's fine. I mean I, I say it to these guys and I don't expect anything less from them right. It's just like getting out of the truck without your hard hat on and you got your ball cap on, you don't realize that you don't have it on, I mean I expect those guys to tell me just as much as anyone else right. It's, you, you, you give warnings, basically at all levels.*

But life on the rigs is different. Employers are less likely to positively affect a worker's driving behavior. The opposite may happen. For example, company policies pertaining to work time and pay may encourage workers to take chances. Some companies do not reward or acknowledge their workers for driving safely or risk free. For example, in order to fulfill transportation needs like delivering a pipe just in time, a push may persuade some workers/drivers to take driving risks as part of the job without offering financial incentives.

Another employer-related influence on the rigs is the shift change, where the incoming crew must arrive on time to replace an outgoing crew. If a worker arrives late because of bad weather or driving too slow, those rig hands and supervisors waiting to exit the work site may become angry. Social pressure is enforced. For example:

- *There's a lot of times when riggers are trying to get back to their rig and the roads are bad and I think if it wasn't for the job like, if they thought they could*

*get away with phoning up the push and saying, “Look, the roads are bad, it’s snowing pretty bad, can’t make “er.”*

- *Your relief is going to choke your ass out and beat the living shit out of you if you go back to the rig and you’re two hours late cause he never got to leave, got off work, until you got there. You’re that person’s relief.*
- *I know if someone asked me to take something there, on the way back from a rig, I’m not paid to go out there. I’m not paid any more or less, I’m not paid over time... I would be more likely to a, be in a little more of a hurry.*

Finally, corporate policies dictate how much work needs to be done in the service field. Service workers feel coerced to produce, to the extent that they make up time driving from site to site. Service workers are placed in a precarious position of deciding whether to take chances to achieve company needs and expectations:

- *We don’t have a crew, per se, like shift rotation. We have a set crew, there’s seven of us that look after well control. We depend on everybody to show up because it’s extreme busy. You’re trying to do 230 rigs, POPs, manifolds, there’s valves, hoses, whatever. If three guys can’t make it in because of weather, we’ve always said as long as there’s two guys in the shop, we’ll get whatever has to get done, we’ll get it done. If you can’t make, can’t make it. We’re not going to force anybody to do what they don’t feel that they can. And we’re an extension of PD so, you know.*

### **Philosophy of Life**

People generally have a philosophy of life, a standard view of their existence which serves as a baseline for their lives. So it is with the oil workers. Their experiences on the work sites, the driving behaviors and the risks that they are or are not prepared to take reflect very much their self proclaimed philosophy of life – “live for the moment” and “live life to the fullest.” The same quotes were heard over and over again:

- *...Just live life to the fullest because, I guess something, you don’t know what could happen right, so, live every day like, I guess it’s corny but is it, it’s going to be your last day, cause you never know what’s going to happen.*
- *Enjoy your time while you’re here. You’re here for a good time, not a long time.*
- *Do whatever you want to whenever you want to do it.*
- *Live everyday like it’s your last. Don’t sweat the small stuff, it’s all small stuff.*

It is interesting to note that the oil patch workers’ philosophy of life is basically to live for the moment. Yet, they spend an extraordinary amount of time on the job, working long hours and engaging in routine tasks. In fact, much of their life is work focused. Their descriptions of work life do not easily translate into life fulfillment. So it

appears that their expressions of philosophy reflect their lives once they are removed from the work site. Once they are with their family or friends they are more likely to “live life to its potential”.

### **Self Perceptions of Oil Workers as People and as Workers**

It appears that the average stay with the oil patch- related company for whom participants worked was about five years or less. Some have worked for the same company for over five years, but they were in the minority. These workers were most likely to interpret their jobs as careers. The more short term or transient workers were more inclined to define their jobs as work for pay. The workers came from all over Canada, most of them on a mission to join the oil patch for the lucrative salaries.

The kinds of people attracted to the industry varied. One employee worked for a clothing company in China, another delivered pizza, and a third was a paramedic. Workers left previous employment like golf course or hotel maintenance, clerical work in grocery stores, warehouse shipping, trucking or waste management. They all had one thing in common – to leave low paying dead end jobs in order to toil in the oil patch:

- *I had my old roommate call up his brother because working with me at a few dead end jobs of nine bucks an hour, and there was work out here, come on out and we'll tell you where to go, so we went to the union hall and every day hammered the guy you know, “We're looking for work, we're looking for work.” And then two weeks after we got into the union. I'm here today. Basically better living like you know, if you had a \$30,000 year in New Brunswick, you had a good year, and you could live off of it though, but it's not a lot of money out there, so here you could make \$100,000 plus no problem.*

And a few workers came to the oil patch directly from a post-secondary educational institution. For example:

- *I got my petroleum tech diploma right out of SAIT coming out of high school and they wanted to pay me 40,000 a year with an education and I said, “Well, I can make 90 or 100 on the rigs!” So send me away.*

### **Recommendations from Oil Workers for Increasing the Seat Belt Wearing Rate of Oil Workers**

Rather than focus entirely on the “what is” part of the oil workers’ realities and seat belt wearing, a second component of the study addressed workers’ thoughts on strategies or practices that would influence their colleagues to buckle up off the work site. Several themes were described.

.....**Increased Enforcement**

Increased enforcement denoted two sub themes. One is that the fines for not wearing seat belts should be increased. The second is that the police should increase their enforcement at the roadside. As a Fort McMurray worker said:

- *Maybe increasing fines even more. Make it very, very expensive if you ever get caught. Like enough to almost hurt you. And, the police presence on 63 that's, great, for the last couple of months, like we said, every Sunday that there's 12 police cars for going to Fort McMurray. You don't even know if you're going to hit one now. Before it was like one or two on average. Now there's a lot.*

The respondent above acknowledged an increase in police presence on Highway 63, but he did not expand on how that has changed or is likely to change increased seat belt wearing.

The idea of increasing fines was debated. Some of the discussants reasoned that because workers earn so much money in Fort McMurray an increase in fines was not likely to be successful. They suggested more severe consequences such as the loss of the driver's license for a period of time or demerit points taken off the license. People will then take notice:

- *Strictly enforcement, severe penalties like if the, like, penalty of a fine people just get upset. You lose your license for a year and then you're forced to re-take your drivers exam? That's, that's going to scare people. A fine, a fine's never going to do anything. People refuse to pay. Money's, money's right easy around here you know.*
- *I like the idea of demerits, though. Four demerits, there you go.*
- *Demerits points would be better. Like if you look at the amount of money that flows through this place. You know when McDonalds is going to give you a grand if you stick around for three months and the starting wage is 14 bucks an hour. \$500 bucks, sure that's a lot of money but that's not as much money as say Calgary. Or where else, you know, when, when, you know, most people up here. Like working on site, most people don't even show up at site unless they're 50,000 a year.*

Closely related to increased enforcement is a policy for buses. According to one of the workers, a large number of buses leave Fort McMurray every day. Yet the passengers are not expected to wear seat belts. This may be a fruitful place to initiate a behavior change and to decrease the risk of bus passengers becoming injured in bus crashes:

- *Probably don't want to hear this but basically enforce it on the bus... For some people it's a nuisance it's just, you know they don't wear it. But basically enforcement I guess, but it would be hard to police on the bus. Like there's you know 25 or 30 buses that leave at four o'clock at night and soon as, you know they check, everybody's going to click on before they get on and they get off and they're just going to click off, right, so.*

## Expanding Company Policies to Off Work Sites

There was general agreement that the majority of workers use their seat belts while they are engaged in company affairs, because in part of company policies that warn workers about potential consequences for anyone not wearing a seat belt in company vehicles. Workers thought that a process may be implemented where the company takes greater responsibility to invoke that policy for their employees off site. As one of the participants said:

- *If you follow the system so well at work, how come you can't follow it at home, right, sort of deal? So you know, bringing it back home. I think the, people are getting ingrained on site but you have to take that stuff further and take it home now. It's, it's fine to at four o'clock, at the end of the day, get home to your family and say, then you're unsafe with your family then, it doesn't matter what we did at work.*

Company image also came into play:

- *It has to do with company image and that. That's how you're going to get guys to wear it.*

Although the suggestions for corporate involvement were made, there was no discussion on how that could be achieved and whether companies would be interested in addressing seat belt wearing off the work site.

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## .....Education

A concept typically mentioned in terms of education was video. Some of the workers believed that a video of the seat belt simulator, or one similar to safety videos shown by company safety supervisors may encourage oil patch workers to buckle up in their spare time. The video should feature severe consequences for not wearing a seatbelt:

- *I think the movies are a good idea. I think a lot of people just need their eyes open to see what can actually to a person without wearing one.*

**An example was given of how a corporate video about seat belt wearing was sent to more than 10,000 employees and its affect on the viewers:**

- *They sent it out, it was a DVD form, and they sent it out to ten thousand employees. I even got one and seen it in the tech centre I don't know how many times. But PD went out and did this DVD and sent it out to ten thousand employees and it's got Hank XXX, who's the President at the time and they go through the whole thing, the lecture about seatbelts, you know, so, to go and send ten thousand DVDs out in the mail to employees is pretty good, expenditure on their point... They show it to all the orientation guys that are going through.*

Some workers suggested that the seat belt wearing issue required more than just one strategy. It required enforcement, education and consequences:

- *...education, high fines and enforcement because if you don't get a slap on the hand, you're going to keep the same old habit, right.*

Or, education, videos and lectures:

- *I'd say those videos, the lectures and the safety education stuff I've got since I've started at (XXXX Inc.), it changed a, like changed how I look at safety and stuff like that. I, I think about slowing down more when I hit ice or fog or you know, double check I got my seatbelt on.*

### **Nothing Will Work**

A number of workers suggested that little has been done to date to increase seat belt wearing amongst oil patch workers, so the situation may be all but hopeless:

- *I don't know. It's tough to say. We've tried pretty well everything. How can you make them if they won't wear it?*

A dominant thought supporting many of the ideas and focus group discussions is the consequence, or the view that oil patch workers must be reminded that they can lose something important by not wearing their seat belts. According to some of the participants, something has to penetrate the worker's mind that a seat belt can save your life. One of the participants put it nicely:

- *You got to value it. I think you've to got have something to lose. For me I've got a lot to lose. I wear my seatbelt because I'm a firm believer that in an accident, 100% of the time it's going to save me, where as without it, I don't stay in the vehicle. I've been there, done that and it kept me alive a couple of times so I got to believe in it.*

More suggestions were offered such as educating society, building safer vehicles and improving driving conditions generally. These recommendations were general and had no specific relevance to Alberta oil patch workers.

## SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The traditional empirical use of summary of the findings is not appropriate for this study. As a qualitative study we offer descriptions that reflect the main thoughts offered by the oil patch workers. They are ideal types that reflect the essence of the data.

### General Patterns

#### Typical Living

- Workers in the oil patch tend to define their life as an amalgam of work, driving to and from work and preparing for work. This sense of work pervades the oil patch worker's social environment, and is more often evaluated as routine, somewhat dreary and out of their control. However, there is no longing to find different work, move away or seek another career. The excessive work is well rewarded, which provides great meaning to the oil patch workers.
- A typical work week is like a serialized existence whereby oil patch workers wake up, go to work, spend an hour or two with family if they are married or some kind of recreation like watching television or playing on the computer, go to sleep and repeat the same activities the next day. These typical heavy workdays are consecutive for about two weeks or longer.
- Typical periods of time-off also ring of routine for workers in Fort McMurray. If they have families that live in the city they tend to engage in more "family-related" activities/chores in their spare time. The underlying theme is recovery from a tired work week.
- For single younger workers time off work is more about taking risks like dirt bike riding, spending money with friends not related to the workplace and drinking beer in the bar.

#### Typical Driving

- Typical driving for oil patch workers is substantially less than that for many other professions, because on a day-by-day basis they live at or near the location of the work site. Some large employers have buses from town to the plant, which greatly reduces driving. However, time-off-work driving, after the probability of a two-week stint on the work site, produces a burst of high-energy long distance driving for the purpose of getting home or escaping to a city.

#### What Oil Patch Workers Drive

- The oil patch worker's vehicle of choice is a pick up truck. It best reflects their lifestyle and the image they have of themselves as workers and individuals. Although these vehicles are considered to be ideal for work-related needs, whether that is short or long distance driving, the meanings workers assign to their trucks extend well into the workers' personal lives.

## Receiving Traffic Tickets

- About two thirds of the workers had received one or more traffic tickets over the last two years. The dominant violation was speeding. More importantly having received multiple traffic citations was not uncommon. There were about eight workers who reported that they received two or three tickets, and five received four or more tickets. Two received ten or more tickets.

## Philosophy of Life

- The experiences on work sites, the driving behaviors and risks that oil patch workers are or are not prepared to take reflect very much their self proclaimed philosophy of life – “live for the moment” and “live life to the fullest.” Similar quotes were heard repeatedly.
- It is interesting to note that the oil patch workers’ philosophy of life is basically to live for the moment. Yet, they spend an extraordinary amount of time on the job, working long hours and engaging in routine tasks. In fact, much of their life is work focused. Their descriptions of work life do not easily translate into life fulfillment. So it appears that their philosophy of life becomes invoked after the oil workers leave the work place. Perhaps then they are more likely to “*live life to its potential*”.

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## Oil Patch Workers

- It appears that the average stay with the oil patch- related company for whom participants worked was about five years or less. Some have worked for the same company for over five years, but they were in the minority. They were most likely to interpret their jobs as careers. Those more transient or having worked less time for oil patch companies were more inclined to define their jobs as work for pay. The workers came from all over Canada, most of them on a mission to join the oil patch for the lucrative salaries.

**The kinds of people attracted to the industry varied. One employee worked for a clothing company in China, another delivered pizza, and a third was a paramedic. Workers left previous employment like golf course or hotel maintenance, clerical work in grocery stores, warehouse shipping, trucking or waste management. One of the participants offered a comment that illustrates the workers’ desire to leave low paying dead end jobs in order to toil in the oil patch.**

## Specific Patterns

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## Rigs vs. Industrial

- A point made in the interviews is that the large plants have a greater number of employees who are constantly supervised. The workers on the rigs are more likely to work on their own, or they are more likely to have limited supervision, resulting in increased risk taking. Furthermore they are more likely to be persuaded by other young workers to take risks as a sign of courage or manhood deemed proper for working in the “bush.”

## **The Culture of Small vs. Large Rigs**

- The hierarchy of rig life goes something like this: the driller is the head worker followed by the derrick hand, motor hand and rough neck. At the bottom of the pecking order is the lease hand who does support work for the others. Generally speaking the workers on the big rigs are more knowledgeable and experienced than those on the smaller rigs. Also on a big rig there is likely to be a collection of older workers who have been scarred and injured. The younger ones on the small rigs have not yet experienced injury and they are raring to get on with their jobs regardless of risk. There is a different pace of life that brings different risks. Life is more likely to be laid back on the big rig and “hell” on a smaller one.
- The smaller rigs create a closer knit group of workers that brings with it a shared attitude and normality, while on a big rig there are more likely to be different groups within the workforce and hence more of a chance for workers to be independent of small group pressures and expected behaviors. As a worker from Fort McMurray summarily said, “*the only difference is within a smaller group of people it’s easier to propagate an attitude.*” The chances of rig wide rituals are less likely to be invoked and expected.
- Small rigs had different rules of collegiality. The workers were typically younger, more likely to take risks like drinking beer after their shifts are over that create pronounced cases of drinking and driving. The incoming shift presents the outgoing shift with a “flat of beer” to be consumed before they get back to the hotel or place in which they are staying. The change of shift is synonymous with a ceremony.
- The larger rigs employ mostly older drillers, who are also likely to take risks, but according to the worker above, the risk of choice is drugs to go on a “hell bender”.

## **Risk and Age**

- There was near unanimous agreement with the Rainbow Lake and Nisku workers that with age comes a decline in risk taking. Older workers are safer workers, but younger workers are stronger and more determined to work harder for longer regardless of the safety costs. However, the workers in Fort McMurray disagreed. They suggested that as workers get older they become more complacent. They get into a routine and by doing so they are less likely to have implanted a safety attitude. Whereas new young workers are scared and likely to check everything carefully before engaging in the behaviors, the older workers are more likely to continue in their ways without giving it much thought. In short “its tough to teach an old dog new tricks.”

## **Definitions of Risk**

- Once respondents began to articulate their points of view on risk they spelled out different versions of risk as it pertained to their lives. A number of them thought that they were “situational” risk takers. They do not take risks on the job but tend to take risks off the job – recreationally. Others are young and they take extreme

risks as part of their lifestyle. A third definition of risk was directly related to work functions that need to be undertaken in order to make a living.

- Driving was invariably one of the key risk domains identified by workers. Poor road conditions, bad weather and potentially meeting fatigued drivers are major risks in their lives.

### **Oil Workers as Risk Takers**

- There are two main groups of oil patch workers, as there are generally in Canadian society – the married and single people. Hence the descriptions of self as a risk taker could be categorized into these two major groupings. Although there were fewer married men than single ones, they tended to lead a conservative lifestyle. They do not see themselves as taking too many risks because of their responsibilities to their families. As they described it, injured workers cannot earn money or support a family. It seems that having a wife and children has changed some of the men from having been prior risk takers. When these men originally entered the oil patch they were risk takers on and off the job, only to have become more methodical and safety conscious today.
- Risks on the job in large industrial plants are basically mitigated and controlled by employee safety policies and practices, which are supposedly enforced. However, the enforcement of safety policies may be more by formal definition than by the working of day-to-day realities. This is especially true on the rigs where workers who disagree with tasks deemed to be unsafe will likely be disciplined by their immediate supervisor (push) or ostracized by the rest of the crew.
- The overall view was that workers in the oil patch do take risks because it is an essential feature of whom they are and what they do. For some the risk is real, but it is worth it because of the “big money” that they get for working in a dangerous job. Taking risks is a fact that is well known and accepted.
- Risk taking usually happens when rig workers try to take shortcuts or save time. The official standards are safety-based, but individual workers decide to take risks for a variety of reasons that are not employer related.

### **Contextual Patterns**

#### **Driving Differently: To/from Work, At Work**

- Oil patch workers drive differently when they drive from work to home than they do when they travel from home to work. Once workers leave the work site they are eager to get home and thereby they speed and take other driving-related risks. They are eager to shave time. And they are likely to be tired. However, when they drive on company time they are not allowed to speed. If they do they may suffer severe consequences like loss of job or probation. Finally, as a general rule most of the oil patch workers do not drive as fast going to work than they do going home. However that may change if they had been drinking in the city and they have to arrive at the rig on time Monday morning. They likely cannot phone for extra time off because of the pressure put on them by the supervisor (push) and the workers on the rig preparing for their time off.

## **Impaired Driving**

- No doubt impaired driving is a major concern for the oil patch. Its risks are well known amongst oil workers. Although it is rationalized as a dangerous action still it is a common occurrence in which workers participate after they finish work. One group of workers suggested that there was a greater risk of impaired driving in northern areas like Rainbow Lake because the police are less likely to patrol for it and that there was a good chance of escaping detection. To help deal with the perceived lack of police patrol, one of the major oil companies operating in the area hired a special constable to patrol the lease roads in the area for traffic violations, especially impaired driving. According to one of oil patch workers, this act helped mitigate some of the impaired driving in town and on the lease roads.

A second group of responses described impaired driving as an issue that is equally prevalent in all parts of the province. The difference is that northerners are less likely to get caught by the police

## **Speeding**

- Nearly all of the oil patch workers admitted to speeding. It is part of the prevailing code amongst oil patch workers. They also recognized it as a major traffic risk in northern Alberta, because of the poor road conditions, tough winters and difficult traffic flow. Many slow moving large trucks ply the northern highways, encouraging drivers speed up and pass, thereby creating more chances for crashes.

## **Wearing Seat Belts at Work**

- Large industry employers have implemented policies that make seat belt wearing mandatory while on the job. This has led to increased seat belt wearing by employees working in large oil patch industries and for workers on large rigs operating in “the bush”. But even mandatory corporate seat belt wearing policies still produce behaviors designed to ruse the supervisors or managers. Some workers fake seat belt wearing when they pass a potentially critical corporate observer. Such action may increase wanton consequences like needless bouncing out of control in a work truck.

## **Dominant Reasons for not Wearing Seat Belts**

- Both the older and younger workers are problematic when it comes to wearing seat belts. Underlying much of what oil patch workers believe is the concept of fate, a recognition that older workers have successfully matured to a certain age because they have done things right. Their belief is that because nothing serious has happened to them to date, no misfortune will happen in the future. Hence there is no need to engage new behaviors like wearing seat belts. And therefore they are not likely to start wearing one at this time. For the younger workers there is the sense of power, living forever and the propensity to take risks. They are less inclined to wear their seat belts all of the time if ever. It was at times referred to as machismo or “*macho bravado*”. But that changes as you get a little older

and start looking after yourself. Other reasons for not wearing seat belts are laziness, stupidity and short trips.

### **Perceived Chances of Being Caught by the Police for Non Seat Belt Wearing**

- Generally speaking the chances of the police catching the local residents for not wearing seat belts are low. Some of the workers thought that the police have more important things to do than sit and look for non seat belt wearers. On a day-to-day routine the police are not as likely to see if someone is buckled up, and if they do see a driver who is unbuckled they are not likely to stop and ticket the driver.
- The conclusion reached by many is that because the police are not likely to apprehend and ticket drivers who do not buckle up, drivers are less likely to buckle up. The formula was shared amongst oil workers in all three locations. The participants from Fort McMurray and Rainbow Lake were most likely to suggest that the chances of the police stopping a driver for not wearing seat belts are zero.

### **Meanings that Workers Assign to Seat Belt Wearing Laws**

- For some workers the seat belt wearing laws have negative meaning. Some oil patch workers don't particularly care about the law and intend to continue on with their actions as they always had before the implementation of the laws. For others the seat belt wearing laws means points on your driving record and traffic tickets. These workers focused directly on the consequences of not obeying the laws. It appears that although some workers believed seat belt wearing laws constituted a violation of their personal freedom and independence, the majority do take the law seriously. But they tend to negotiate actual wearing according to different situations in which they find themselves. That is one of the reasons that most of the workers answered that they wear their seat belts 90% or less of the time.

### **Fatigued Driving**

- Representatives from AORP wanted to determine what factors contributed to the seat belt wearing rate in RHA 9. The study indicated that from the workers' perspective fatigue was the greatest risk they faced driving in RHA 9. It happens to workers with such regularity that issue is defined as a high priority risk amongst oil workers.
- The work situation plays a major role in the presence and subsequent potential hazards of fatigued driving. Oil workers volunteer to work overtime for the extra earnings or because employers expect them to work an increasing number of subsequent hours, especially in the winter. This creates a situation whereby workers easily become overly tired and subsequently drive.
- Most of the fatigued driving happens when workers travel south on their days off. It is not unusual for oil patch workers to experience dangerous situations like driving into a ditch or driving on the wrong side of the road when fatigued.

- Folk wisdom plays a major role in combating fatigued driving. For example, workers roll down their windows for the rush of air, drink coffee, wash their face with snow, walk around the vehicle for a short period of time, run the air conditioning, smoke “*too many cigarettes*”, use the cell phone non stop, drink bottled water or listen to a loud playing radio. Still close calls or potentially dangerous driving situations happen.
- Given a choice between different kinds of risks on the road, most of the workers thought that fatigued driving is a bigger risk than impaired driving or speeding. Some of the participants detailed a concern about other drivers they meet on the road who may be overly tired. Fatigue represents one of the most dangerous driving situations identified by respondents.
- Fatigue is inherent or “systemic” in the oil workers’ workplace context whereby they work 12 to 14 hours per day in order to fulfill corporate expectations and personal desire for overtime pay.

### **Influencing Oil Worker Driving Behaviour**

- Married workers suggested that their wives can and do influence their driving behaviours. They “tell” workers to slow down, often in a vigorous and determined way. But, according to a number of oil workers, wives may also have a negative influence on the drivers. They tell workers to speed up, go faster and/or take risks passing other vehicles.
- Most of the single oil patch workers are determined not to be influenced in any way by women. Not being influenced was defined as a fundamental part of who they are – independent to do as they like.
- The answers pertaining to friends being able to influence oil patch workers driving behavior implied a dual meaning. One was negative in that friends in the vehicle can distract the driver. However, from a positive perspective, friends as passengers encourage drivers to be more aware of their responsibility to drive safely.
- Employers can definitely influence how a worker drives. But the influence is entirely confined to work-related situations, or the worker’s on-the-job driving behavior. It begins with “due diligence” when a worker signs a hazard assessment sheet. But work supervisors can also influence the way workers drive. As company agents, supervisors are charged to enforce company safety policies. They take the opportunity to approach workers and tell them to wear their seat belts.
- Work life on the rigs is different. Company policies pertaining to work time and pay may encourage workers to take chances. Some companies do not make it worthwhile for their workers to drive more safely or risk free. For example, in order to fulfill transportation need, such as having a pipe delivered quickly, a push may persuade oil patch service workers to take risks without offering them financial incentives. Another employer-related influence on the rigs is the shift change, where the incoming crew has to be on time to replace an outgoing crew.

If a worker arrives late because of bad weather or driving too slow, those rig hands and pushes preparing to exit the work site are likely to become angry.

- Corporate policies dictate how much work needs to be done in the servicing field. Service workers are placed in a precarious position of deciding whether to take chances to achieve company needs and expectations.

### **Recommendations from Oil Workers for Increasing the Seat Belt Wearing Rate of Oil Workers**

- **Increased Enforcement.** Increased enforcement was denoted in two sub themes. One is that the fines for not wearing seat belts should be increased. The second is that the police should increase their enforcement at the roadside. Although increasing the amount of the fines was discussed as a possible strategy, some of the discussants reasoned that because workers earn so much money in Fort McMurray an increase in fines was not likely to be successful. They suggested more severe consequences such as the loss of the driver's license for a period of time or demerit points taken off the license. People will then take notice.
- Closely related to increased enforcement is a policy for buses. According to one of the workers, a large number of buses leave Fort McMurray every day. Yet the passengers are not expected to wear seat belts. This may be a fruitful place to initiate a behavior change and to decrease the risk of bus passengers becoming injured in bus crashes.
- **Expanding Company Policies to Off Work Sites.** There was general agreement that workers use their seat belts while they are engaged in company affairs, because in part of company policy that warns workers about potential consequences for anyone not wearing a seat belt in a company vehicle. Workers thought that a process may be implemented where the company takes responsibility to invoke that policy for their employees off site.

**Education.** A concept typically mentioned in terms of education was video. Some of the workers believed that a video of the seat belt simulator, or one similar to safety videos shown by the company safety supervisors may encourage oil patch workers to buckle up in their spare time. The video should feature severe consequences for not wearing a seatbelt.

**A Combination of Things.** Some workers suggested that the seat belt wearing issue required more than just one strategy. It required enforcement, education and consequences or education, videos and lectures:

- **Nothing Will Work.** A number of workers suggested that little has been done to date to increase seat belt wearing, so the situation may be all but hopeless.
- A dominant thought supporting many of the ideas and focus group discussions is the consequence, or the view that oil patch workers must be reminded that they can lose something important by not wearing their seat belts. According to some of the participants, something has to penetrate the worker's mind that a seat belt can save your life.

- More suggestions were offered such as educating society, building safer vehicles and improving driving conditions generally. These recommendations were general and had no specific relevance to Alberta oil patch workers.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Seat belt wearing for oil workers does not appear to be a driving issue that can best be addressed from the worker/community perspective. Greater impact is likely to come from industry led interventions. It is therefore recommended that:

**Oil industries provide greater leadership in their employees' seat belt wearing behaviors not only while at work, but also to and from work.**

Increased seat belt wearing can potentially result directly from such interventions as increased enforcement/penalties, learning/awareness, community development and/or enforcement of specific workplace policies. However it can also be realized as a residual outcome resulting from interventions that address a different, yet highly important/relevant traffic safety issue. For the oil workers, that issue is fatigued driving. It was announced as the number one risk to which oil workers are particularly attentive. Hence it is recommended that;

**Interventions be introduced that target fatigued driving for the natural resource industry workers while providing seat belt wearing strategies in the process.**

Fatigued driving typically happens after oil workers have worked for excessive hours per day (12 to 14 hours or more) consecutively for a period of two weeks or more. After their work stint is over oil workers usually drive home elsewhere in the province directly after the end of their shift. They are overly tired. Hence it is recommended that:

**Oil industry employers provide tangible programs that may include safe rooms, sleep sites, etc and that make it mandatory for workers to rest for a couple of hours before they leave the premises, or to provide incentives that are generous enough to motivate oil workers to stay and rest for several hours before engaging in long distance driving.**

Recognizing that large oil industry employers require quantitative evidence to show that fatigued driving is in fact an issue with their employees, it is recommended that:

**A roadside survey be initiated on major oil site highways, where drivers are randomly stopped to answer fatigue-specific questions about the workplace and record seat belt wearing.**

## DISCUSSION

One of the most intriguing issues that was not originally queried, but that arose from the research was fatigued driving. With little or no solicitation, oil workers discussed the problem of fatigued driving. It was considered to be the most important, feared high-risk driving scenarios in the north. Long work hours and consecutive days on

the job makes workers tired. Then they drive home, often in very poor winter driving conditions – whether that is a short trip to nearby lodging or a long trip somewhere in Alberta. They become a driving hazard.

A secondary issue related to the first is that oil patch workers recognize and show respect for tangible driving hazards that appear in the northern areas. Logging trucks straddling the center lane on narrow treacherous highways, poor visibility because of snowstorms, and other drivers who are suspected of being tired and/or drunk happen routinely. To help compensate for such dangers, oil patch workers are more likely to wear their seat belts.

It appears that when oil workers are in a lucid state of mind, and not impaired or tired, they recognize tangible driving hazards and they are more likely to wear their seat belts. They recognize situational and immediate risks as being very dangerous and thereby they are more inclined to wear their seat belts. It is a purely utilitarian act– seat belt wearing for life in specific situations. It is less likely to be seat belt wearing for obeying the law or for a generally safer roadway environment.

It is interesting to note that the oil patch workers' basic philosophy of life is to live for the moment; to live life to the fullest. Yet, they confessed to spending an extraordinary amount of time toiling at the work site engaging in routine yet potentially risky tasks. By their own admission, much of their life is work focused, a description of life that hardly is synonymous with the implied meaning of living for the moment. It appears that once they are removed from the work site many are more prepared to “go for it”, engaging in high risk recreation, speeding on the roads, partying, and freely spending money. Their philosophy of life appears to focus on personal post-work time rather than an overall time span that includes work, family and self, the area where non seat belt wearing is most likely to occur.

Finally, as we reviewed the data we could glean on the existence of a link between employer initiatives on the work site and the need of an intervention for oil workers off site. This link could or perhaps should be further explored by AORP. Companies have developed a series of traffic safety programs generally and seat belt wearing videos specifically for their employees on site. But they do not or have not become involved in the grey zone – the time of driving between work and home, or the white zone of personal time driving.

It would be valuable if corporations partner with community agencies to organize seat belt wearing programs for off-worksites driving that are similar to programs corporations use for on-worksites driving. Videos, lectures, interrelated (work site and community) reinforcement of seat belt wearing, patrolling lease roads in partnership with local police are a few examples.

## **POSTSCRIPT**

Previous research pertaining to occupational health and injury and present research findings based on oil patch workers' points of view illustrate quite clearly that the oil industry is actively promoting safety on the work site, whether that includes hand to job functions or driving company vehicles. However, as we previously noted, once workers leave the worksite they enter a grey zone. Industries expect or demand that workers put in substantial hours and do so safely. But once the workers leave the worksite and get into their cars the responsibility for safety is removed from the oil industry.