

Traffic Safety

BACKGROUND

Traffic accidents, the leading cause of death for children, teenagers and young adults, cost the people of Michigan some \$10 billion a year—more than double the monetary cost of all crime. Unless otherwise noted, the information below are from 1996, the latest year for which comparable data are available.

- Annually, from 1987 to 1996, an average of 1,427 people were killed and more than 143,000 injured in some 394,000 traffic accidents in Michigan.
- Occupants were 11 times more likely to be killed if they were not wearing safety belts. Eighty-three percent of belted drivers and passengers walked away without injury—compared with 69 percent of those who did not use restraints.
- Nearly 37 percent of fatal accidents involve at least one drinking operator or pedestrian.
- Excessive speed is involved in more than 15 percent of fatalities.
- Nearly 31 percent of all accidents and more than 60 percent of alcohol-related fatalities are single-car crashes.
- Of more than 2,200 drivers involved in fatalities, almost 14 percent are aged under 21, and 24 percent are aged under 25.
- Nearly one-third of fatalities occur at intersections.
- The number of deaths fell from 2.3 per hundred million miles driven in 1986 to 1.5 in 1992—and then climbed to 1.7 in 1995.
- Alcohol involvement—once pegged at 50 percent in all fatalities has fallen over the years but leveled off in the upper 30s.
- Most fatalities occur on secondary roads.
- The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that from 1986 through 1995, air bags saved 2,768 lives in America, while 89 people (5 in Michigan) died as a result of air bag deployment. Figures are not available on Michigan motorists saved.
- Thirteen snowmobile drivers were killed on the roadway, in 499 crashes.
- Off-road or all-terrain vehicles were involved in 205 roadway accidents, killing eight drivers.
- Farm machines were involved in 256 crashes on the highways—killing four people (only one of whom was a farm machine driver).
- The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports 12 vehicle-train fatalities (all were drivers).

From 1987 to 1996, the number of vehicles on Michigan roads and the number of miles they have been driven have dramatically increased; fortunately, accidents and deaths have not kept pace.

- Car and truck registrations increased—almost 15 percent—to more than 8.0 million.
- Miles driven soared almost 16 percent—to nearly 88 billion miles.
- Accidents rose to over 435,000, while deaths dropped to about 1,500.

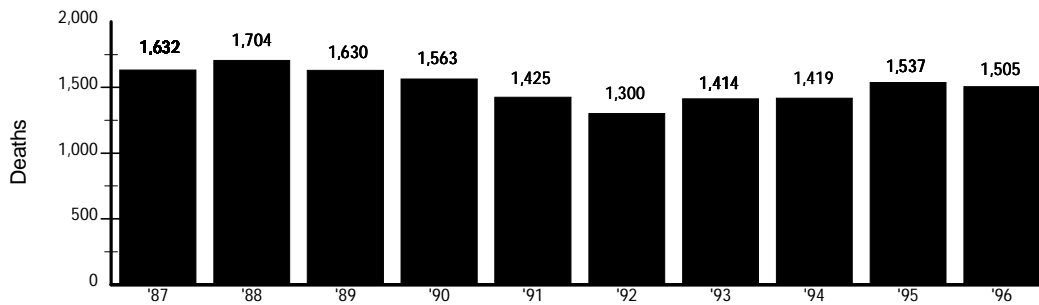
Exhibits 1 and 2 display the number of deaths in vehicle accidents and passenger-vehicle miles traveled, respectively, in 1987 through 1996.

In addition to cars and trucks, there is one other major vehicle class: motorcycles and scooters. In 1996

more than 128,000 registered motorcycles and motor scooters were driven an estimated 385 million miles in Michigan and were involved in nearly 2,500 accidents, injuring 2,200 and killing 62. The death rate for motorcycles and scooters is 16.1 per 100 million miles traveled (compared to the rate for all vehicles of 1.7 per 100 million miles).

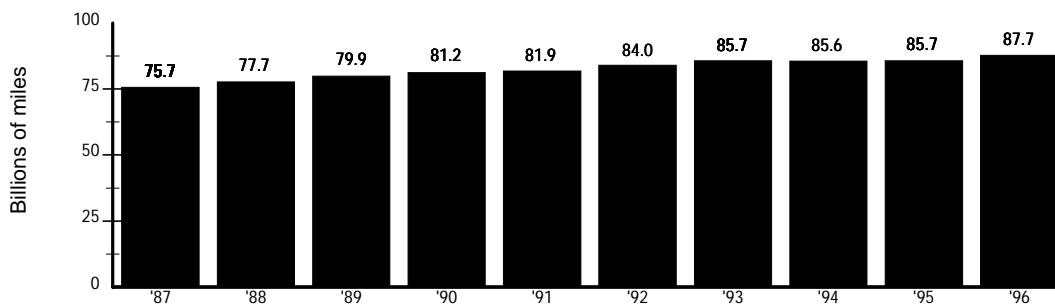
In 1997 the *New York Times* reviewed police reports across the nation and found that 100,000 high-speed chases had been reported in 1996, 20 percent of which ended in accidents. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that 377 persons died in these chases—107 of them people whose vehicles got in the way of the pursuit. In the past five years, 19 police officers also lost their lives while giving chase. The problem is receiving attention across the nation. New Jersey has enacted guidelines that spell

EXHIBIT 1. Vehicle Deaths in Michigan, 1987–1996



SOURCE: Office of Highway Safety Planning.

EXHIBIT 2. Vehicle Miles Traveled in Michigan, 1987–1996 (billions of miles)



SOURCE: Office of Highway Safety Planning.

out legal grounds for a chase and make it a felony to flee. Tampa, Florida, restricted such chases to violent felonies but dropped the restrictions when citizens complained of rising car thefts; when pursuit was resumed, car thefts dropped and pursuit-related injuries again increased.

DISCUSSION

Organizations concerned with traffic safety in Michigan are largely consistent in their view of what is needed next in the effort to lower the death toll on Michigan highways. The Office of Highway Safety Planning (OHSP), in the Michigan Department of State Police, the Traffic Safety Association of Michigan (TSA), Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), the Automobile Club of Michigan (AAA), and the Michigan secretary of state's office support one or more of the following programs—most of which are spelled out in legislation currently under consideration:

- “Standard enforcement” of a mandatory safety belt law
- Reduction of blood alcohol limits for drivers
- Retention of the motorcycle helmet law
- A ban on passengers riding in the bed of pickup trucks
- Helmet requirements for infants being transported on bicycles or pulled in bicycle trailers
- Coordination of records involving drinking operators of snowmobiles, off-road vehicles, and watercraft
- Measures addressing the danger of high-speed chases
- Tougher strictures on repeat offenders

Safety Belt Enforcement

A 1997 survey conducted by the University of Michigan's Transportation Research Institute shows that 70.1 percent of Michigan drivers and front seat passengers use safety belts (down slightly from about 70.8 a year earlier). Currently, police may enforce the seat belt law only after stopping a motorist for some other reason. “Standard enforcement” means the police may stop a motorist for no reason other

than that s/he was not wearing a safety belt. Supporters of the legislation maintain that in just one year, standard enforcement of the law would result in 100 fewer fatalities, 3,000 fewer serious injuries, and savings of up to \$127 million in medical and insurance costs. Opponents include libertarian groups, who see this as an example of unwarranted government infringement on individual rights; some representatives of the African-American community, who see it as an excuse for police harassment; and the Michigan Farm Bureau, which views primary enforcement of the safety belt law as “a dramatic expansion of police power.”

House Bill 4280, passed and sent to the Senate in late 1997, provides that on a first offense, a motorist will receive a warning, but after that, failure to buckle up is a civil infraction with a \$25 fine. If safety belt use has not risen to 85 percent by the close of 2004, the warning provision will be eliminated. More than half of Michigan residents apparently favor such legislation. A random telephone survey of 600 registered voters by Marketing Resource Group for the Michigan Safety Belt Coalition shows support by a 54-43 percent margin.

Blood-Alcohol Limit

Nearly everyone agrees that the level at which a driver can be considered drunk should be lowered from 0.10 percent blood alcohol to 0.08. As recently as a decade ago alcohol was involved in approximately 50 percent of traffic fatalities; the figure fell steadily until 1992 and has hovered around the 37th percentile ever since. Legislation to lower the level, SB 99, was introduced in 1997. The Michigan Licensed Beverage Association and Michigan Beer and Wine Wholesalers oppose lowering tolerances on the ground that when drinking is a factor in a serious accident, the driver's blood-alcohol level more often is near or above .15. They favor targeting these drivers and repeat offenders.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving calls for mandatory release of hospital blood test results when a drinking driver has been injured or killed. Legislation—modeled on a Hawaii law—may be introduced in 1998.

Those opposed to such legislation are likely to cite privacy violation.

Measures also have been introduced to punish off-road vehicle drivers under the influence, and SB 852–53, passed by the Senate and now in the House, would provide for prosecuting drivers under the influence of chemical inhalants.

Motorcycle Helmet Laws

All safety organizations urge continued resistance to the annual push to repeal motorcycle helmet laws, on the ground that all society pays a price when a cyclist or passenger is injured or killed. House Bill 4284, which would limit the helmet requirement to operators under 21 years of age, passed the House in 1997 and awaits Senate action. Many motorcyclists dispute the propriety of the government's requiring helmets, contending that such legislation infringes on their personal freedom.

Pickup Truck-Bed Passenger Ban

This issue is revived periodically—most recently by a 1997 accident near Lansing in which some 12 young people were killed. HB 4255, banning the practice, passed the House in 1997 and was sent to the Senate. Opponents, who include the Michigan Catholic Conference and the Michigan Farm Bureau, don't want the law to apply to farm workers on the ground that it would interfere with the livelihood of workers on the one hand and of farmers on the other. The Farm Bureau points out that farm workers for years have been routinely driven from job to job in the back of pickup trucks without a significant incidence of accidents.

Helmets for Children on Bicycles and in Carriers

Children under four years old would be required to wear helmets when transported on bicycles or bicycle trailers—as would all mo-ped operators—under HB 4518, which passed the House and went to the Senate in 1997. No opposition has been publicly expressed.

Coordination of Records

A 1997 Booth Newspaper survey reported that 46 percent of snowmobile fatalities involved alcohol and that

70 percent of the operators involved had a record of driving their automobile while drunk. As a means of keeping track of chronic offenders, Mothers Against Drunk Driving supports legislation requiring officials to check the automobile driving record of snowmobile, off-road vehicle (ORV), and watercraft operators involved in accidents; MADD believes this would shine the light of public scrutiny on chronic offenders and increase the likelihood of vigorous prosecution. Legislation may be introduced requiring that operators of snowmobiles and ORVs be licensed as a means of controlling drunken and reckless driving. The proposed legislation may call for impounding snowmobiles or ORVs operated by drivers with a revoked automobile operator's license, but so far no one has suggested that a recreational-vehicle accident involving alcohol should affect one's automobile driver's license.

High-Speed Chases

House Bill 4039, passed by the House and sent to the Senate in 1997, would create a commission to establish guidelines for high-speed police chases. A companion bill (SB 163) would limit government liability unless the chase was judged "willful, wanton, or grossly negligent." Michigan State Police already have addressed the problem with a police-officer training program that stresses the importance of knowing when, and being willing, to quit a "no-win" situation.

Repeat Offenders

More than a dozen bills have been introduced aimed primarily at people who drive after their license is revoked. Among them are measures to

- make it felony to (1) kill or injure someone while driving without a license or (2) have let an unlicensed driver behind the wheel if s/he subsequently causes a traffic injury or death;
- impound the license plate or confiscate the vehicle of an unlicensed driver;
- require an ignition interlock (a device that renders a vehicle inoperable when a driver fails to pass a breath test for alcohol) and subsequent treatment for substance abuse;

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- require a special license plate for convicted drunk drivers; and
- impose stiffer fines for driving without a license.

Debate on the various issues involves the merits of harshly punishing offenders versus providing treatment and whether it is fair to negatively affect or embarrass family members of offenders.

There also are questions of jurisdiction. In the present system, jurisdiction over traffic offenses and repeat offenders is divided between the courts and the secretary of state; some legislation would assign jurisdiction in all but drug-related offenses to the secretary of state.

The secretary of state's office also backs a change in the law to eliminate a practice called "taking pleas under advisement"—whereby some judges accept a motorist's guilty plea and fine, then take the plea under advisement. This means the plea is not forwarded to the secretary of state's office, the fine remains with the court, and the offense never is noted on the driver's record. Legislation to end the practice has not moved through the legislature—reportedly because the practice, a form of docket control in some courts, is a lucrative one for others. It is the subject of an auditor general's report due out in June 1998.

Young-Driver Training

The Secretary of State's office reports that in its first year, Michigan's graduated driver-licensing program is having a positive effect on teen drivers. Public Act 308 of 1996 established a three-tier licensing system for young drivers that requires mandatory road testing, parent involvement, crash- and violation-free periods before a novice driver may advance to the next licensing level. Examiners report a drop in the rate of road-test failure—from 15.6 percent in April–November 1997, to 13.5 percent in December and 9.9 percent in January 1998.

Other Concerns

In 1997 freeway speed limits were raised. Most observers agree that it is too early to gauge the effect of the increase, but accident, injury, and death data will be analyzed with this in mind.

There are a number of other traffic matters of concern but no concrete proposals have been put forward to deal with them. The Automobile Club of Michigan (AAA) raises three such issues.

- *Driver inattention* Such distractions as cell phones and CD players, to name two, are diverting driver attention from the road.
- "Road rage" This is aggression behind the wheel—matched by disproportionately angry driver reaction to the perceived aggression of others. No one really knows what to do, but many observers cite it as a frightening problem.
- *Traffic flow* With traffic volume outpacing road miles, some observers believe that more driver-communications programs are needed—e.g., automated or "smart" freeway signage or driver-information radio bands. The Michigan Department of Transportation (MDOT), recognizing that "we can't build our way out of traffic congestion," is deploying Intelligent Transportation Systems in the Detroit and Grand Rapids areas—ranging from solutions as simple as changeable signs to programs as complex as computer chips embedded in the road and global satellite positioning systems—to provide drivers with information on traffic conditions. Other elements include plans to vary the number of lanes available in each direction, depending on the time of day and volume of commuter traffic, and institute car-pool lanes. The Michigan State Police and the MDOT maintain a Michigan Intelligent Transportation System Center in Detroit. Oakland County is pioneering in this area with such steps as varying traffic-light timing to respond to traffic volume at various times of day.

See also Automobile Insurance; Substance Abuse.

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