Death Trend Is Down Overall Since 1975
Except in Pickup Trucks and Utility Vehicles

Last year's motor vehicle death toll of 40,115 exceeded the previous year's 39,235. But the 1992 toll was the lowest since the U.S. Department of Transportation began its Fatal Accident Reporting System in 1975, and the increase in deaths during 1993 was only 2 percent. This long-term downward death trend has occurred despite substantial increases since 1975 in motor vehicle registrations, licensed drivers, and amounts of travel.

Most categories of motor vehicle deaths have declined. Pedestrian deaths are down 30 percent and motorcyclist deaths are down 53 percent, compared with 1980. Bicyclist deaths are down 20 percent since 1975, while large truck occupant deaths are down 55 percent since peaking in 1978.

Deaths of occupants in passenger vehicles — cars, pickup trucks, utility vehicles, and large/cargo vans — have not shown comparable declines. Because of fatality declines among pedestrians and other groups, passenger vehicle occupants have represented a steadily increasing proportion of all motor vehicle deaths since 1975.
Pedestrian Deaths per 100,000 People by Age, 1975-93

- **Q-9 yrs**
- **1Q-19 yrs**
- **20-34 yrs**
- **35-64 yrs**
- **≥ 65 yrs**

**All ages**

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**Passenger Vehicle Death Rates, 1993 Compared with 1978**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Passenger Cars</th>
<th>1993</th>
<th>1978</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheelbase ≤ 95 in.</td>
<td>258</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>95-104 in.</td>
<td>206</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>105-114 in.</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>115-124 in.</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 124 in.</td>
<td>196</td>
<td>112</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pickup Trucks</th>
<th>1993</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 3,500 lbs</td>
<td>235</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 3,500 lbs</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Utility Vehicles</th>
<th>1993</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wheelbase ≤ 100 in.</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100-120 in.</td>
<td>270</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt; 120 in.</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cargo/Large Passenger Vans</th>
<th>1993</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

**Passenger Vehicle Occupant Deaths** have declined since the 1970s, but not by 20-25 percent or even 10 percent. They declined 3 percent during 1975-93. Deaths in cars decreased 15 percent (from 25,809 to 22,031), while deaths in two other kinds of passenger vehicles—pickups and utility vehicles—increased from 4,183 to 7,171. The increasing deaths in these vehicles reflects their growing popularity as alternatives to cars. About 60 percent of total passenger vehicle sales last year were cars (excluding minivans), down from about 80 percent in 1975.

**Death Rates in Passenger Vehicles:** The absence of substantial change in total passenger vehicle deaths since 1975 “is worth noting in comparison with other categories of motor vehicle deaths,” explains Institute Senior Vice President Allan F. Williams, “but it would be misleading to study only numbers of deaths. What counts as much or more is what’s happening to death rates, and these are coming down among all vehicle types.”

The death rate per million registered passenger vehicles one to three years old decreased from 258 in 1978 to 157 last year. Rates decreased for every type and size of passenger vehicle, from the smallest cars to the largest pickups and utility vehicles.

The most dramatic decline occurred in small utility vehicles, among which the death rate per million registered vehicles was an alarming 1,063 in 1978 but down to 257 last year. Williams attributes this 76 percent reduction in part to getting some extremely unstable models of small utility vehicles off the road. As a group, these vehicles still aren’t very stable. There’s a pronounced tendency to roll over, compared with cars, but many newer models are larger than their earlier counterparts and not as unstable.

**Age and Sex Differences:** Two of every three passenger vehicle occupant deaths are males. Males have higher per capita death rates than females, too, and this is true at every age. However, the disparity in deaths and death rates between males and females isn’t as wide as it used to be.

Deaths of male drivers age 16 and older decreased from 15,721 in 1975 to 14,175 in 1993, while female driver deaths increased from 3,616 to 5,680. The male driver death rate was 21 per 100,000 people in 1975, compared with 4 for females. By 1993, the male rate was down to 15 while the female rate had increased to 6, in part because of disproportionate increases in female licensure rates and miles driven.

**Pedestrians:** A total of 5,638 pedestrians died in crashes last year, down 25 percent since 1975 and 30 percent since the 20-year high of 8,070 in 1980. Of even greater interest is the changing per capita death rate, which declined from a high of 3.6 per 100,000 people in 1980 to 2.2 in 1993.

Death rates decreased among pedestrians of all ages but decreased the most among the youngest and oldest people. Children younger than age 10 had the second highest death rate in 1975 (4 per 100,000) but, by 1993, their rate was the lowest (1.4) among all age groups. At the other end of the spectrum, the death rate dropped among people 65 years and older from 7.7 per 100,000 in 1975 to 3.8 in 1993. Yet the pedestrian death rate still is much higher among elderly people than younger groups.

“Declines in deaths have been occurring among very young and old pedestrians since at least 1950,” Williams points out. “The trends may reflect changes in amount or type of exposure, but no data exist to determine this for sure.”

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**Pedestrian Deaths per 100,000 People by Age, 1975-93**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>1975</th>
<th>1985</th>
<th>1993</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-9 yrs</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-19 yrs</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-34 yrs</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-64 yrs</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>≥ 65 yrs</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Passenger versions of vans, often referred to as minivans, are classified as cars.
Motorcyclists: Deaths of motorcycle riders used to represent 10 percent of all motor vehicle deaths (1980-85), but now they represent only 6 percent. Total cyclist deaths peaked at 4,930 in 1980 and, since then, have declined to 2,341, in part because of a 30 percent decrease in cycle registrations.

When motorcycles crash, their riders lack the protection of an occupant compartment. It isn't surprising, then, that the death rate on motorcycles is much higher (585 per million registered cycles in 1993) than in cars (170).

The motorcyclist death rate peaked at 909 per million in 1978 and has been declining since then. Still, it's about three and a half times higher than the rate in cars.

Bicyclists: A total of 804 bicyclists died in 1993 crashes. This represents only 2 percent of all motor vehicle deaths — the same proportion as in 1975 — but what's different is that the problem increasingly involves older bicyclists. Thirty-two percent of bicyclist deaths in 1975 involved riders age 16 and older. By 1992, the proportion had nearly doubled to 62 percent in part because more adults are riding bicycles for recreation, transportation, and exercise.

Large Trucks: Total deaths in crashes involving tractor-trailers and other large trucks have decreased 23 percent since reaching a peak of 6,147 deaths in 1978. By 1991-93, fewer than 5,000 people were dying each year in large (cont'd on p.6)
Rollover Labels Aren’t Enough; Prevent Rolling in the First Place, Safety Groups Advise

Petition Asks NHTSA Not to Abandon 21-Year-Old Effort Toward Performance Standard to Prevent Passenger Vehicle Rollovers

The Institute and other safety groups are criticizing a National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) proposal to require labels on new passenger vehicles in lieu of a vehicle stability standard. A letter to Transportation Secretary Federico Peña and a formal petition to NHTSA urge rulemaking on a performance standard that would reduce vehicle rollover propensity and decrease deaths and injuries in rollover crashes.

NHTSA recently proposed to include rollover and other safety information on a label attached to all cars and other passenger vehicles including vans, pickup trucks, and utility vehicles. The proposal goes forward, NHTSA hopes to have the labels on new vehicles by the 1997 model year.

At the same time, the agency stopped work on a rollover stability standard. This action comes 21 years after the agency first proposed a rule.

"Providing consumer information alone is a one-dimensional approach to the rollover safety problem," the letter to Peña points out. "Minimum design requirements that reduce the propensity of vehicles to rollover as well as crash protection in the event of a rollover are critical components of a comprehensive rollover safety program.

The Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, the Institute, and other safety groups that signed the letter endorse consumer information in the form of a label alerting car buyers of a vehicle’s relative likelihood of rolling over. But labeling cars and other passenger vehicles isn’t enough, the groups tell Peña.

Many of the same safety groups, including the Institute, also petitioned NHTSA not to terminate its efforts toward a rollover prevention standard. The petition emphasizes that about 9,700 occupant deaths occur annually in cars and other kinds of passenger vehicles.

Patchwork Approach Is No Approach: The U.S. Secretary of Transportation says requiring vehicle stickers with information about rollover resistance "makes sense and allows [buyers] to make more informed choices about their car and light truck purchases." Peña emphasizes that the safety sticker is part of what he calls a "comprehensive approach to the rollover problem.

Included in the approach "are antilock brakes, improved interior padding, roof crush resistance, stronger door latches, and safer glass," Peña notes.

The Institute and other safety groups counter that this approach "amount[s] to only a patchwork quilt of regulatory initiatives, some of which may never come to fruition." NHTSA’s so-called comprehensive approach is "only a post hoc rationalization designed to persuade the public that the agency is taking action on rollover safety despite its termination of rulemaking on a vehicle stability standard," the safety groups point out in the petition.

More than One Performance Standard: NHTSA claims it rejected a vehicle stability standard in part because its statistical analyses would justify only one performance standard for all types and sizes of passenger vehicles. Such a standard would force “radical” redesign of some passenger vehicles including vans, smaller pickups, and a high percentage of sport utility vehicles. NHTSA says a standard at the upper limit of values for resisting rollover “would affect 1,648,000 vehicles manufactured in 1991.” This, the agency implies, would amount to undue control of consumer choice.

But in the petition to reconsider a regulation to reduce rollover, the safety groups tell NHTSA it should have considered options other than a single performance standard for all passenger vehicles from large cars to small utility vehicles. The latter have a rate of rollovers in single-vehicle crashes that’s more than three times the passenger car rate. The latest statistics from NHTSA’s Fatal Accident Reporting System indicate that the single-vehicle rollover crash death rate in small utility vehicles one to three years old in 1993 was more than 10 times the rate in the largest passenger cars.

"The agency should have considered setting a standard that recognized the heterogeneous nature of the multipurpose vehicle class,” the petition advises. "NHTSA should have focused in particular on a standard covering the vehicles with the worst rollover experience rather than a single standard for all passenger vehicles. Specifically, the Institute recommends minimum stability criteria for each passenger vehicle type, based on the more stable vehicles in each vehicle class.

In addition to the Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety and the Institute, groups signing the petition to reconsider a rollover standard are the Center for Auto Safety, Consumer Federation of America, Motor Voters, National Head Injury Foundation, National SAFE KIDS Campaign, and Public Citizen.
(cont'd from p.3) Truck crashes. Only a tiny proportion of these deaths involve the truck occupants. Most are people in other kinds of vehicles that are struck by the trucks. In fatal crashes involving a large truck and a passenger vehicle, only 2 percent of the deaths are truck occupants — a proportion that's held at 4 percent or less since the 1970s.

Alcohol Impairment: Back in 1980, half of all fatally injured drivers of passenger vehicles, large trucks, and motorcycles had blood alcohol concentrations (BACs) of 0.10 percent or more, but the picture has changed since then. Proportions with high BACs have declined so that, last year, only 36 percent of all fatally injured drivers had BACs of 0.10 percent or more.

The decline is greatest among tractor-trailer drivers. Fourteen percent of those killed in 1980 crashes had high BACs. The proportion was up to 16 percent in 1981 but, by last year, it had plummeted to 3 percent.

Among passenger vehicle driver deaths, the proportion with high BACs dropped from 53 percent in 1980 to 37 percent in 1993. The biggest decline occurred among drivers 16-20 years old. In this group, the proportion with high BACs hit a 14-year low of 27 percent in 1993.

Fatally injured adult pedestrians are the only group in which alcohol impairment hasn't decreased markedly. Forty percent of

rates over time as well as analysis of 1993 deaths by driver age and sex; time, day, and month of crashes; alcohol involvement, and other factors.

Four more fact sheets summarize state laws that address highway safety issues — DUI/DWI laws, safety belt/child restraint laws, motorcycle helmet use laws, and laws with special provisions for young drivers.

Waiving Vision Rules For Truck Drivers Isn't Lawful, Court Decides

A federal court ruled earlier this month that the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) cannot grant vision waivers to commercial truck drivers with good sight in only one eye. The court determined that FHWA didn't prove its waiver program was consistent with the safe operation of motor vehicles as required by federal law.

The decision was rendered in response to a suit brought by the Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety. This group challenged FHWA's decision to grant waivers to visually impaired drivers on grounds it violated the intent of the Motor Carrier Safety Act. In deciding on the waiver program, the agency "acted in an arbitrary and capricious manner," Advocates said. (See Status Report, Vol. 27, No. 12, October 3, 1992). The American Trucking Associations also filed a brief challenging the waiver.

Between July 1992 and January of last year, FHWA issued waivers to more than 2,500 commercial drivers who could demonstrate three years of driving experience without a citation for any serious violation. The agency said at the time this program would enable it to study the relationship between vision disorders and safety.

However, the Motor Carrier Safety Act of 1984 stipulates that FHWA may grant a waiver only if it "determines that such waiver is not contrary to the public interest and is consistent with the safe operation of commercial motor vehicles." FHWA's stated purpose for waivers "begs the question whether those sight-impaired drivers will be able to operate their [commercial motor vehicles] with the same degree of safety as those who meet the agency's current vision standards," the court noted. Therefore, "adoption of the waiver program was contrary to law."

Although the Institute wasn't a party to the Advocates' law suit, Institute researchers argued against the waivers when FHWA first proposed them, saying the agency's plans were inconsistent with research findings. A 1987 study shows that drivers with less than 20/40 acuity in one eye have 65 percent more crashes than do drivers with at least 20/40 corrected vision in both eyes.

FHWA still issues waivers to commercial drivers with insulin-treated diabetes, despite evidence that insulin treatment is associated with increased crash risk. (See Status Report, Vol. 28, No. 10, Aug. 21, 1993.)

U.S. Senate Confirms Ricardo Martinez for NHTSA Post, Ending Three-Month Delay

After holding up the nomination of Ricardo Martinez to become administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation finally approved him for the post without objection or comment on August 11. Six days later, the full Senate unanimously approved the choice.

Last May, Senator Wendell H. Ford of Kentucky put a hold on the nomination. (See Status Report, Vol. 29, No. 6, May 28, 1994.) Until then, Martinez had encountered no obstacles, breezing through a May confirmation hearing that included only live questions and lasted less than an hour. A spokesperson in Ford's office said earlier this month that the hold was "taken off several weeks ago" because the senator "felt confident" it could go forward.

NHTSA has been without an administrator for 19 months, since January 1993.
On the Inside

Trends in motor vehicle deaths since the 1970s are analyzed by vehicle type, age and sex of drivers, alcohol involvement, and other factors.................p.1

Labeling vehicles’ rollover propensity shouldn’t take the place of a federal rule to reduce rollovers in the first place, safety groups tell NHTSA .......p.4

Vision waivers for commercial drivers aren’t consistent with safety, federal court tells FHWA .........................p.7

Senate unsnags Martinez nomination for top NHTSA post .........................p.7

STATUS REPORT

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