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The Highway Death Toll Rises: Here's Why

Jim Motavalli

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JAN 4, 2013 ([Archives](#))

We'd gotten complacent, because the highway death toll has been steadily dropping. In 2011, it hit its lowest level in more than 60 years, with 32,367 fatalities, compared to 43,510 in 2005. We were pointing with pride to a number of factors—high-tech cars bristling with safety equipment, fewer vehicle miles traveled (in part because of high gas prices, which hit an average \$3.60 a gallon last year), tougher regulations ("[Click It or Ticket](#)," "[Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over](#)") and a growing consciousness about distracted driving. Federal safety officials were touting "remarkable improvements in both the way motorists behave on our roadways in the safety of the vehicles they drive."

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Fatal accidents were up in 2012. Distracted driving and miles traveled were key factors. (Flickr/Tobyotter)

But erase all that because [deaths were up by 7.1 percent in the first nine months of 2012](#). Looking around the country, Kentucky, Nebraska and South Carolina are all reporting higher state fatalities, though southern Connecticut is down. [AAA calls the most recent trend "alarming."](#)

For 2012 we have only the first nine months of the year, because the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) hasn't released the rest. But that number, 25,580, suggests we just went through a very bad year indeed. Those numbers are up 1,700 from the same period in 2011.

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FIND A MECHANIC

We're all searching for answers. NHTSA failed to meet my deadline with a response. But Sharon Berlin, a safety guru at AAA, had a few ideas. She said that warmer and clearer weather in the first part of last year got more people on the road. And that's reflected in the stats: Yes, vehicle miles traveled (VMT) went up in those first nine months of 2012, though only six tenths of one percent.

"It's not a big percentage, but it translates to 14.2 billion miles, and that's a lot," Berlin said. It is, and I'm sure VMT is one reason for the grim uptick in highway deaths, but maybe not a big one. Fatalities are rising per a set number of miles driven—from 1.09 per 100 million miles in the first nine months of 2011 to 1.16 in the same period of 2012.

With the final numbers for 2011 in hand, we see another glaring stat: Distracted driving went up two percent that year over the 2010 numbers. It may be up more in 2012, and we'll know soon.

Car Talk's Ray Magliozzi thinks today's complicated cars are a big part of the growing distraction—it's not all teens with cellphones. "I think to a large extent the user interface may be to blame," Ray said. "As people trade in their 10-year-old cars for new ones, they are finding out perhaps how much more complicated it is to adjust the heat or change the station on lots of these new models. I feel that folks are being distracted way too much, even after they've had their new cars for several months. I also get the feeling that everyone is driving much faster than ever before. A new car will make you do that sometimes. It is distressing that the numbers are up. We were doing so well."

They're not the only culprit, but cellphones definitely are a big reason for the numbers going up. According to the feds, 3,092 people died in crashes involving distracted driving in 2010. That same year, a whopping 416,000 were hurt in crashes with a distracted driver involved. In 2011, the numbers jumped with 3,331 deaths. Those are big numbers, and sure to rise because cellphone ownership—and out-of-control use—is on the ascendant. Research consistently shows, too, that those numbers are almost always dramatically under-reported. Who wants to admit you were talking to your kid when you drove off the road and through someone's living room? (Or worse.)

We take distracted driving very seriously here at Car Talk Plaza. [Here's our blog on the subject](#). And here's some NHTSA video you need to see about one very young victim of distracted driving:



There are other factors: Motorcycle-related deaths are up, and fatal accidents involving big trucks climbed 20 percent (though not on large volumes). Bicycle-related fatalities saw an



uptick, which means that bike riders and drivers need to be more conscientious about sharing the road. In 2011, 677 bicyclists were killed in traffic accidents, up 8.7 percent from 623 in 2010. But note that the actual numbers are much lower than for distracted driving (or for alcohol, but that's a constant).

I have a dilemma here, because I have two teenagers learning how to drive. I think they've gotten the message about distracted driving, but it doesn't mean their friends have. Some 40 percent of all American teenagers—nearly half—say they've been a passenger in car whose driver used a cellphone in a dangerous way, The Pew Center reports.

Monash University says that drivers using hand-held devices are *four times* more likely to end up in crashes that injure themselves. I'd know that stat even if I hadn't read it here, because my daughter recited it to me. She could have added that the crash risk from drivers text messaging is *23 times* worse than if they weren't using their phone. Here's one more of those distracted driving videos. Remember, you only have to be distracted for a few seconds:



I'm not claiming that the horrifying bump in traffic deaths has just one or two causes, and don't forget about all that extra driving. "You can't point to one particular thing," says Berlin, "but there is more risk of collision when you're on the road—that's simple physics. The rest is only speculation."

Right now, I'm speculating that major factors are distracted driving and more people on the road. What do you think? Let us know!

COMMENTS

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Flyingtigger

Sat, 2013-01-05 13:38

I am a professional truck driver and I see a lot from up in my cab as I am doing the defensive driving scan. I can tell you, I see a lot of people using cell phones to talk and text, including "police officers". Do you know that for CDL drivers there is a federal mandated law prohibiting the use of hand held cell phones while driving, and that the fine if caught is @ \$1100.00 for the individual, and @ \$27,000.00 for the trucking company if they do not have a hands free cell phone policy in place, with every drivers signature acknowledging it? So why are CDL drivers penalized more severely than non CDL drivers? I would venture to guess that more cell phone related accidents are caused by the non CDL sector of drivers. I do not have all the statistics on hand, but

judging from what I see and deal with on the road, a lot of car and pickup truck drivers, (4 wheelers in trucker's lingo) are very rude and careless in there driving practices concerning trucks. I see a lot of cars making lane changes with out signaling, cutting in front of trucks, therefore filling the space for stopping distance cushion, which for a truck you need more of, and they do this in rush hour traffic that stops and starts constantly. So what I would like to know is what is the percentage of accidents caused by cars that are involving trucks verses truck driver error?

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Kesler

Sat, 2013-01-05 14:13

Here is an interesting take as well from Robert Reich:

<http://robertreich.org/post/257309739> that it's due to the economy. As there are more people who are employed, there are more people driving. More people driving, more fatalities.

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Cole's Law

Sat, 2013-01-05 18:40

Another possibility: It's been a very dramatic year politically, which means people are spending a lot more time angry at what they hear over the radio, thus driving more aggressively.

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Kajabla

Sun, 2013-01-06 00:40

"So why are CDL drivers penalized more severely than non CDL drivers?" Inertia! CDL drivers are moving tens to hundreds of thousands of pounds of freight. At 70 miles an hour you can crush many cars and people in an accident. It is imperative that safety regulations be more strenuous for masses like those. Having said that I do think we still need more education and higher fines for the average drivers too. Driving requires thought and attention. What we really need is far better public transportation in this country too. It pollutes far less and would allow those phone addicted folks to yak and text all they want on their journey.

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Snoring Sarge

Sun, 2013-01-06 14:30

Life has always been dangerous, We only fool ourselves to think otherwise. Yes I wear a helmet, yet I accept inherent risk of riding a motorcycle. As Americans our diet is far more deadly than our roads There is no greater act of patriotism than to be killed two days before your first social security check, in a crash with a texting 36 year old lawyer driving a Kia, that totals you and your 35 year old gas guzzler... just saying think of what you doing for the national debt.

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ParrotsandPotatoes

Mon, 2013-01-07 13:01

I think automakers should really move away from touch-sensitive control panels (e.g. MyFord Touch, CUE). They're confusing to use at first even when you're standing still!

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Mustangman

Mon, 2013-01-07 14:02

The reasons are many and tough to change. My favorites are; merging traffic that doesn't look ahead or to the left and believes they have the right of way (so that semi just better move over!), cell phone users that don't have hands-free (and can't steer), distracted cell phone users who, while in the left lane, latch onto the blind spots of a car in the middle lane to set thier speed, clandestine texters who constantly look into their laps so the cops won't see them texting and finally a generally poor overall level of driving skills taught to them by their parents who don't drive very well either. Cars have gotten so easy to drive and so very capable, people just don't give the task the respect it deserves.

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