

TRAFFIC SAFETY AND OLDER AMERICANS: MAKING ROADS SAFER FOR MOTORISTS

A report prepared by The Road Information Program (TRIP)

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Study was originally released in October 2000. The data used in the study is still the most recent available.

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Executive Summary

Traffic safety improvements will become increasingly important as the largest generation in American history – the Baby Boomers – approach retirement. Significant safety improvements to our nation’s roads will help preserve and extend the personal mobility these older drivers have enjoyed throughout their lives.

The major findings of this report are:

Older Americans are increasingly involved in fatal motor vehicle accidents, even as overall fatal traffic crashes have declined over the past several years

- The number of Americans aged 70 and above involved in fatal traffic crashes increased by 33 percent from 1989 to 1999.
- The number of overall motor vehicle fatalities decreased by 9 percent during the same time period.
- Florida led the nation in the number of older Americans involved in fatal accidents in 1999, with 494. It was followed by Texas, with 334, California with 326, and Pennsylvania with 215 and New York with 200.

Older Americans are becoming an increasingly larger segment of the total population.

- The size of the older generation is projected to double over the next 30 years, growing to 70 million by 2030.
- In 2000, there are an estimated 35 million people aged 65 or older in the U.S., comprising about 13 percent of the population.
- Americans aged 85 and older are the fastest growing part of the population.

Highway travel by older Americans is increasing faster at a faster rate than travel by other Americans.

- Vehicle miles of travel by persons 70 and older increased 7 percent between 1990 and 1995.
- Vehicle miles of travel by persons aged 16-69 increased just 3 percent over the same period.

Based primarily on its analysis of the 1998 Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) report, “Older Driver Highway Design Handbook,” The Road Information Program (TRIP) recommends the following comprehensive set of safety improvements for improving older driver safety:

Signage and lighting:

- clearer and less complex signage that is easier to follow
- larger lettering on signs
- better street lighting, particularly at intersections

Intersections:

- bright, luminous lane markings
- overhead indicators for turning lanes
- overhead street-signs
- adding or expanding left-turn lanes

Streets and Highways:

- wider lanes and shoulders to reduce the consequences of driving mistakes
- longer merge and exit lanes
- rumble strips to warn motorists when they are running off roads
- curves that are not as sharp

Introduction

Traffic safety improvements will become increasingly important as the largest generation in American history – the Baby Boomers – approach retirement. Significant safety improvements to our nation's roads will help preserve and extend the personal mobility these older drivers have enjoyed throughout their lives.

As people age, their eyesight, reaction time and muscle dexterity deteriorate, often making driving more difficult. Roadway improvements, such as adding left-turn lanes at intersections, can help make driving safer for older Americans, as well as for the population at large.

Growing Numbers of Older Americans

The increase in older driver involvement in fatal accidents are occurring as older Americans form a greater and greater portion of the overall population. The Census Bureau reports that, in 2000, there are an estimated 35 million people aged 65 or older in the U.S., comprising about 13 percent of the population. The number of older Americans will only increase, since in 2011, baby boomers will start to turn 65, and by 2030, estimates show that one in five people will be aged 65 or older. In fact, the size of the older generation is projected to double over the next 30 years, growing to 70 million by 2030, according to the Census Bureau.

In addition, Americans aged 85 and older are the fastest growing part of the population. In 2000, about 2 percent of the population is aged 85 or older; by 2050, this group will account for about 5 percent of the population, the Census Bureau reports.

Census Bureau data also shows that Florida, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Iowa and North Dakota, with 15 percent or more of their populations aged 65 or older, have the highest proportion of older Americans in the country.

Societal Trends Influence Levels of Mobility

Societal trends indicate that older Americans, particularly women, will be more mobile than their predecessors. Americans are living longer and healthier, so they can remain behind the wheel for many more years than in the past. In addition, women have attained higher economic and education levels than during previous generations, affording them similar levels of personal mobility to men.

Federal statistics also show that the majority of older Americans reside in the suburbs and therefore use their cars more often and drive longer distances than their predecessors.

Older motorists have been more mobile in the 1990s, with vehicle miles of travel by persons 70 and above increasing 7 percent between 1990 and 1995, according to data from the 1995 National Personal Transportation Survey (NPTS). During the same time period, vehicle miles of travel for persons aged 16-69 increased just 3 percent. Older

women drove an average of 6 percent more in 1995 compared to five years earlier; older men drove an average of 8 percent more.

Americans aged 70 and older drove an average of 6,779.33 miles in 1995, compared to 6,337.43 five years earlier. Motorists between 16 and 69 drove an average of 14,077.89 miles in 1995 and 13,687.21 in 1990.

Older Americans, like their younger counterparts, overwhelmingly use private vehicles as their transportation mode of choice. Two-thirds, or 66 percent, of person trips by Americans aged 65 and over, are in private vehicles (as drivers), according to the 1995 NPTS. And additional 23 percent of trips by older Americans are as passengers in private vehicles.

An analysis of the 1995 NPTS by a researcher at the University of Virginia found that Baby Boom women – who are more educated and have greater economic independence than previous generations of American women – will be as mobile as their fathers were into old age. Previously, the study noted, married women would usually drive with their husbands, and if widowed, rely on friends or family for transportation. Baby Boom women have driven their own cars for years and will most likely continue to drive themselves, increasing the number of vehicles, the number of trips and miles traveled on the country's roads.

Baby Boom women are expected to retain their drivers' licenses in greater numbers than the current population of older women. Women have also historically made up the large majority of senior citizens. The U.S. Census Bureau estimates that women already account for 64 percent of Americans aged 75 and older.

Older Drivers and Fatal Accidents

The growing mobility of older Americans is a significant traffic safety challenge since statistics show that older Americans are increasingly involved in fatal motor vehicle accidents as they drive more and more. The number of Americans aged 70 and above involved in fatal traffic crashes increased by 33 percent from 1989 to 1999 even as overall fatal traffic crashes declined during the same time period, according to federal data.

New data compiled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) shows that 4,934 older Americans were involved in fatal motor vehicle accidents in 1999, up from only 3,719 persons a decade earlier. In comparison, the number of overall motor vehicle fatalities dropped from 45,582 in 1989 to 41,345 in 1999, a 9 percent decrease.

Florida led the nation in the number of older Americans involved in fatal accidents in 1999, with 494. It was followed by Texas, California, Pennsylvania and New York.

States with the highest number of older Americans involved in fatal accidents

State	Number of older Americans involved in fatal motor vehicle accidents (1999)
1. Florida	494
2. California	334
3. Texas	326
4. Pennsylvania	215
5. New York	200
6. Michigan	197
7. North Carolina	183
8. Ohio	178
9. Missouri	158
10. Georgia	152
10. Illinois	152

Making Roads Safer for Older Americans

A number of federal reports have documented that the most difficult aspects for older drivers are issues related to intersections, merging and weaving and interpreting a variety of traffic signs and signals. In fact, for drivers aged 80 and above, more than half of all fatal accidents occur at intersections, compared to one in four for drivers less than 50 years old.

Traffic safety is an important issue for Americans of all ages, but especially for older drivers who are frequently less able to recover from injuries suffered in motor vehicle accidents compared to younger motorists. Highway repairs and improvements can help improve driving conditions and reduce the number of accidents and fatalities.

Based primarily on its analysis of the 1998 Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) report, “Older Driver Highway Design Handbook,” The Road Information Program (TRIP) recommends the following comprehensive set of safety improvements for improving older driver safety:

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Conclusion

While making safety improvements to roadways will specifically help older drivers, considering their physical limitations, such improvements will also make driving safer for Americans of all ages. Vehicle travel increased 30 percent from 1988 to 1998 in the United States, and the data indicate that vehicle travel will continue to climb, among both old and young Americans alike. With so much travel expected, roads should be as forgiving as possible to help reduce traffic-related fatalities. With the graying of the population, perhaps it is time to retrofit America's roads in ways that help minimize problems associated with driving errors; so simple mistakes do not always result in accidents.