

Traffic deaths decline due to safer roads, vehicles

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Getting Around

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The snapshot is grim. Almost 300,000 traffic accidents occur each year in the **Chicago** region, and a fatal crash takes place about every 21 1/2 hours on average.

Yet a deeper examination reveals encouraging signs that have resulted in about 200 lives being saved each year. The rates of traffic deaths and serious injuries have declined dramatically since early last decade thanks to safety enhancements on roads as well as newer vehicles that offer a better chance of surviving crashes, according to a study set for release Monday.

While the report by the **Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning** cites substantial progress in traffic safety between 2002 and 2008 in northeast Illinois, there is still major work to be done, experts say. The biggest challenges include cutting down on vehicle-pedestrian accidents in the city of Chicago; fatal vehicle accidents that occur late at night across the metropolitan area; crashes among teenage drivers; and high accident rates where rapid suburban expansion has occurred in **Kendall, Lake** and **Will counties**, officials said.

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For the seven-county region, the annual number of deaths and injuries from vehicle accidents fell 12.5 percent from 2002 to 2005 and 18 percent from 2005 to 2008, according to the study. Fatalities alone decreased 30.5 percent from 2005 to 2008, from 629 deaths annually to 437.

"Fewer people are dying on the roads in our communities," said Tom Murtha, a senior planner at the planning agency who co-authored the report. "It's a sign of how healthy and livable this community is."

The statistics are based on data collected by the **Illinois Department of Transportation**. The report provides an updated analysis on a traffic safety overview that the planning agency started in 2002 and revises every three years.

One surprising conclusion from the research is that travel times can be significantly reduced on the Chicago area's crowded roadways by improving the overall safety of the system.

"If we are serious about reducing congestion, one way is to reduce crashes," Murtha said. "There is positive reinforcement between the two."

The study presented the findings in the context of the risk of a traffic accident and the exposure to such risk. Population and vehicle miles traveled grew moderately from 2002 to 2005, suggesting an increase in the risk of a crash, the researchers said. Population continued to grow through 2008 by 1.5 percent, but vehicle miles traveled declined 2.4 percent.

Based on the latest available data through 2008, the Chicago area is now below the 2008 national target of one fatality per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, the report said. The rate for the Chicago region was 0.74 deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled.

DuPage County recorded the lowest fatality rates over the entire period studied. **Suburban Cook County** and **Lake County** had the second-lowest fatality rates for 2008, the report said.

In Chicago, where drivers average shorter trips and the overall share of automobile usage is lower than in the suburbs because of the availability of an expansive mass-transit network in the city, the fatality rate in vehicle

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accidents went from the lowest in 2005 to above the average for the region in 2008, the study found.

The greatest declines in crashes took place in Chicago between 2002 and 2008, but the crash rates are still highest in the city — three times the rate of some rural areas, the study said.

Also troubling, almost 25 percent of fatal crashes in Chicago involved pedestrians, the report said. Of the 92 pedestrian deaths in traffic accidents across the Chicago region in 2008, 52 occurred within the city of Chicago, Murtha said.

Meanwhile, in **McHenry, Kane**, Will and Kendall counties, all of which have a substantial number of rural roads that lack safety features such as median barriers and lighting, the fatality rates, while declining, are still higher than in crashes occurring in some more densely populated areas. Roads in the inner-ring suburbs tend to have more highway dividers and pavement markings such as chevrons to help drivers stay in their lane on curves, said Parry Frank, the lead author of the report.

In **Kendall County**, where suburban development is leading to more crashes, the highest rate of fatalities was recorded both in terms of population and miles traveled.

"Adding more striping on roads and installing cable median barriers to prevent cars from crossing over into oncoming traffic will help to significantly reduce accidents on rural roadways," Frank said.

Cable median barriers, which are high-tension steel cables strung together, are designed to catch out-of-control vehicles, and they more forgiving in terms of the impact of a crash than traditional concrete jersey barriers, he said. The cable systems also do a better job of keeping fast-moving vehicles on the proper side of the roadway, while vehicles can flip over concrete barriers or be deflected violently away from them.

The report also cast a spotlight on the dangers of late-night travel. Traffic fatalities occurring between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. accounted for 36 percent of all vehicle-related deaths in the region in 2008, despite representing only 11 percent of the vehicle miles traveled in the region. In Chicago, 46 percent of all traffic fatalities happened late at night in 2008, up from 25 percent in 2002, the study found.

Drowsiness, intoxication, slower reaction time and higher speeds on uncongested roads at night were identified as factors by the researchers that need to be addressed through education and stricter law enforcement.

Tougher seat belt laws in Illinois as well as roadside checks aimed at catching drunken or drug-impaired motorists are helping cut the rate of serious crashes, the researchers said. In addition, new vehicle designs are safer than older ones because of advances in air bags, anti-lock brakes and better crash zones on cars, they said.

For example, 2007 model vehicles involved in crashes had 45 percent fewer serious injuries per occupant compared with 1993 model vehicles, the study said.

On the issue of transforming young and inexperienced drivers into safer motorists, a recent Tribune report said fatal crashes statewide involving 16-year-old drivers fell about 50 percent from 2007 to 2008 as a result of the state strengthening graduated licensing rules. The planning agency's study found that in the Chicago region, the reduction in fatal crashes among 16-year-olds was about 80 percent from 2005 to 2008.

"We still need to address the large numbers of young people driving late at night and getting involved in crashes," Frank said.

The full report can be found at cmap.illinois.gov/cmp/safety.aspx.

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