

Safety administration: Traffic deaths on the rise

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The roads are becoming increasingly dangerous across the nation, according to new data on motor vehicle crashes.

The national number of traffic fatalities in 2015 increased 7.2 percent from the previous year, reversing a nearly decade-long decrease in deadly crashes, according to data the National Highway Transit Safety Administration released Aug. 29

While NHTSA figures show the number of traffic deaths in Massachusetts dropping from 354 in 2014 to 306 in 2015, a report from the nonprofit National Safety Council shows the number of fatalities climbing in 2016.

Through the first six months of 2016, traffic deaths in Massachusetts are up 20 percent compared to the same span last year, according to an NSC analysis. Nationally, motor vehicle deaths in the first half of 2016 are up 9 percent compared to the same window in 2015, the NSC data shows.

“Americans are driving more miles,” said Mary Maguire, director of public and legislative affairs for AAA Northeast. “The U.S. government reported we broke a record in 2015, driving 3.1 trillion miles, and we’re on pace to break the record again in 2016.”

Lower fuel prices and a strengthening economy are likely factors, she said.

“The economy is improving, and more people are back at work, so more people are commuting to work,” she said.

The 3.5 percent increase in miles driven is the largest single year increase since 1992, according to the NHTSA. Southborough Police Chief Kenneth Paulhus said crashes are a combination of two things.

"The roads are more congested than ever, and there's a lot of distracted driving," he said. "That's the number one complaint - traffic and safety."

Distracted driving, drunken driving and failure to use seat-belts are all factors that contribute to fatal crashes.

“As someone who drives almost 40,000 miles per year, I see a lot of people using their phones while driving and looking at their phones, especially when they're in congestion,” Maguire said. “You can’t multitask when you drive. Driving requires all your focus. Your first responsibility is safety for yourself, your passengers and all the people on the road.”

Natick Police Lt. Brian Lauzon, who is in charge of the department's traffic division, said there have been three fatal crashes in town since November of last year. Distracted driving is the number one cause of crashes, he said.

"There's an increase in bad behavior while driving," said Lauzon. "Common sense is out the window. Look at today's cars. They're virtually soundproof. People are doing things in their car, rather than paying attention. People are paying attention to all of the amenities that their cars have rather than the road."

Milford Police Chief Thomas O'Loughlin said drivers need to pay closer attention.

"Our experience is a lot of accidents are due to inattentiveness," said O'Loughlin. "Whether people are preoccupied by texting or speaking on the phone, we don't

know. If you look at speeding, you could sit on any street off a highway, there will be people coming off the highway still going 60 mph and they don't even realize it. They have no idea."

Kelly Nantel, the National Safety Council's vice president for communications and advocacy, pointed to high-visibility law enforcement, sobriety checkpoints, strong motorcycle helmet laws and strong seatbelt laws as effective ways to boost safety.

She also said technology should be embraced. Nantel suggested that cars could be built with devices that prevent a cell phone from operating inside the vehicle. Technology can also be used to prevent a drunken driver from getting behind the wheel.

"It's trending in the wrong direction, but it's not without hope," Nantel said. "We have proven countermeasures and technology. We just have to have the will to do it." Lauzon said he is in favor of requiring cellphone use to be hands free, which he said could cut down on a lot of problems. He said banning texting while driving is not enough.

"It's hard to prove," said Lauzon. "I pulled up beside a car on Rte. 9 and there was a young woman driving, and she's there texting - I can see both thumbs on the phone. The light turned green, and she accelerates with both thumbs still on that phone. I pulled her over and I cited her."

For Stacy Thompson, executive director of the Boston-based Livable Streets Alliance, some of the solutions may also lay in street design. Wider lanes encourage drivers to go faster, while a lack of protected bike lanes and adequate crosswalks increase the chances of fatal crashes, she said.

She pointed to the bike lane on a stretch of Boston's Beacon Street, which is separated from traffic by parking spaces, as an example of a safe design.

Thompson also applauded the Boston's City Council's vote in April to lower speed limits in the city from 30 to 20 mph unless otherwise posted.

"I think we need to be aware and be frightened by the increase in fatalities," Thompson said. "But the biggest takeaway is much of this is preventable. We do have measurable and proven solutions to reduce the number of fatalities."

Daily News Staff writer Norman Miller contributed to this report.