

Traffic Safety Facts

Research Note

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Motor Vehicle Traffic Crashes as a Leading Cause of Death in the United States, 2001

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Summary

In 2001, motor vehicle traffic crashes ranked 8th overall as a cause of death. When ranked by specific age, motor vehicle traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for age 2 and every age 4 through 33. The table (overleaf) shows the ten leading causes of death by age group. The age groups reflect categories of interest to NHTSA in terms of Child-Restraint Programs (Toddlers, Infants and Young Children), New Drivers (Youth and Young Adults), Other Adults and the Elderly. The ranks reflect the status of the cause of death in that age category

Background

This Research Note examines the status of motor vehicle traffic crashes as a leading cause of death in the United States in 2001. This note reflects an update of a prior research note (DOT HS 809 661) that was based on the mortality data for 2000. It is based on a study of the ranking of 68 causes of death, which have been adopted by the National Center for Statistics and Analysis (NCSA) of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). This study was originally prompted by a number of unanswered questions regarding adequate background material and appropriate information pertaining to the general concept of motor vehicle traffic crashes as a leading cause

of death. Although the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), in its annual report on mortality, publishes detailed tabulations of the leading causes of death, the fatalities due to motor vehicle traffic crashes are "lumped" under the very general category of Unintentional Injuries. Fatalities due to motor vehicle traffic crashes comprise a significant proportion of all fatalities due to unintentional injuries at certain ages and this has prompted NHTSA to separate motor vehicle crashes as an individual cause of death in this report. The data used in this report is the public use file of the final mortality data for the U.S. in 2001, as provided by NCHS.

Methodology

The NCSA-adopted listing of 68 causes of death is comprehensive in that all underlying causes are represented. Fifty-one of these 68 adopted causes reflect the underlying causes based on internal morbid bodily conditions, while sixteen NCSA-adopted causes reflect the underlying causes based on external factors such as crashes and acts of violence and the remaining cause reflects all other diseases. This 68-cause listing is not an arbitrary listing, but is generally in close agreement with a special listing of death causes used by the NCHS to report on leading causes of death in the United States. The latter differs from the NCSA listing primarily in

causal areas related to unintentional injuries (accidental death). While NCHS uses the combined cause of unintentional injuries in its reports of leading causes of death, this study separates out the various causes that comprise unintentional injuries like fatalities in motor vehicle traffic crashes, accidental falls, poisoning, motor vehicle non-traffic crashes, etc. Accordingly, the rank of some causes of death will differ from those reported by NCHS. The NCSA cause listing also differs from the NCHS listing for causes of infant mortality. While NCHS, for reasons of public health interest, uses a detailed 130 cause listing, the NCSA list combines it into one major cause – conditions originating in the perinatal period.

NHTSA will publish a comprehensive report titled Motor Vehicle Traffic Crashes as a Leading Cause of Death in the U.S., 2001 that will describe the ranking in greater detail.

Years of Life Lost: This is the number of remaining years that the person is expected to live had they not died. The number of years of life lost due to a particular cause is the aggregate of years of life lost for all persons that died due to that cause. The expected years of remaining life is calculated using standard tables of life expectancy by age (Life expectancy at selected ages for 2001, NCHS).

Top 10 Leading Causes of Death in the United States for 2001, by Age Group¹

RANK	Cause and Number of Deaths										Years of Life Lost ²	
	Infants Under 1	Toddlers 1-3	Young Children 4-7	Children 8-15	Youth 16-20	Young Adults 21-24	Other Adults			Elderly 65+		All Ages
							25-34	35-44	45-64			
1	Perinatal Period 13,734	Congenital Anomalies 496	Young Children 4-7 533	Children 8-15 1,546	Youth 16-20 5,979	Young Adults 21-24 4,136	25-34 6,759	35-44 16,569	45-64 139,785	Heart Disease 582,730	Heart Disease 700,142	Malignant Neoplasms 23% (8,614,131)
2	Congenital Anomalies 5,513	MV Traffic Crashes 421	Malignant Neoplasms 400	Malignant Neoplasms 829	Homicide 2,414	Homicide 2,738	Homicide 5,204	Heart Disease 13,326	Heart Disease 98,885	Malignant Neoplasms 390,214	Malignant Neoplasms 553,768	Heart Disease 22% (8,110,571)
3	Heart Disease 479	Accidental Drowning 393	Exposure to Smoke/Fire 178	Suicide 447	Suicide 1,879	Suicide 1,924	Suicide 5,070	MV Traffic Crashes 6,891	Stroke 15,518	Stroke 144,486	Stroke 163,538	MV Traffic Crashes 5% (1,700,952)
4	Homicide 332	Homicide 362	Congenital Anomalies 168	Homicide 391	Malignant Neoplasms 814	Accidental Poisoning 771	Malignant Neoplasms 3,994	Suicide 6,635	Diabetes 14,913	Chronic Lwr. Resp. Dis. 106,904	Chronic Lwr. Resp. Dis. 123,013	Stroke 5% (1,687,683)
5	Septicemia 312	Malignant Neoplasms 321	Accidental Drowning 164	Congenital Anomalies 324	Accidental Poisoning 566	Malignant Neoplasms 768	Heart Disease 3,160	HIV 5,867	Chronic Lwr. Resp. Dis. 14,490	Influenza/Pneumonia 55,518	Diabetes 71,372	Chronic Lwr. Resp. Dis. 4% (1,444,745)
6	Influenza/Pneumonia 299	Heart Disease 200	Homicide 133	Accidental Drowning 293	Heart Disease 398	Heart Disease 543	Accidental Poisoning 2,507	Accidental Poisoning 5,036	Chronic Liver Disease 13,009	Diabetes 53,707	Influenza/Pneumonia 62,034	Suicide 3% (1,079,822)
7	MV Traffic Crashes 139	Exposure to Smoke/Fire 170	Heart Disease 82	Heart Disease 273	Accidental Drowning 326	Accidental Drowning 211	HIV 2,101	Homicide 4,268	Suicide 9,259	Alzheimer's 53,245	Alzheimer's 53,852	Perinatal Period 3% (1,070,154)
8	Nephritis/Nephrosis 139	Septicemia 96	MV NonTraffic Crashes 51	Exposure to Smoke/Fire 140	Congenital Anomalies 244	Congenital Anomalies 206	Stroke 601	Chronic Liver Disease 3,336	MV Traffic Crashes 8,750	Nephritis/Nephrosis 33,121	MV Traffic Crashes 42,443	Diabetes 3% (1,014,201)
9	Stroke 108	Influenza/Pneumonia 92	Benign Neoplasms 46	MV NonTraffic Crashes 125	Accidental Falls 114	HIV 167	Diabetes 595	Stroke 2,491	HIV 5,437	Septicemia 25,418	Nephritis/Nephrosis 39,480	Homicide 3% (924,263)
10	Meningitis 78	Perinatal Period 63	Septicemia 33	Chr. Lwr. Resp. Dis. 102	Acc. Disch. of Firearms 114	Accidental Falls 134	Congenital Anomalies 458	Diabetes 1,958	Nephritis/Nephrosis 5,106	Hypertension Renal Dis. 16,397	Septicemia 32,238	Chronic Liver Disease 2% (623,998)
A³ L L	27,568	4,288	2,703	6,672	15,851	14,940	41,683	91,674	412,204	1,798,420	2,416,425	All Causes 100% (36,866,317)

¹ When ranked by specific ages, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for age 2 and every age 4 through 33.

² Number of years calculated based on remaining life expectancy at time of death; percents calculated as a proportion of total years of life lost due to all causes of death.

³ Not a total of top 10 causes of death.

Source: National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) CDC, Mortality Data 2001

Note: The cause of death classification is based on the National Center for Statistics and Analysis (NCSA) Revised 68 Cause of Death Listing. This listing differs from the one used by the NCHS for its reports on leading causes of death by separating out unintentional injuries into separate causes of death, i.e., motor vehicle traffic crashes, accidental falls, motor vehicle nontraffic crashes, etc. Accordingly, the rank of some causes of death will differ from those reported by the NCHS. This difference will mostly be observed for minor causes of death in smaller age groupings.