



Mass. car crash deaths surge; experts blame distracted driving

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JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

A box of flowers sat at the scene of a fatal crash.

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

GLOBE STAFF FEBRUARY 16, 2017

Deaths from motor vehicle crashes rose last year in Massachusetts — and across the nation —

continuing a troubling multiyear surge that experts believe is being fueled in part by more people driving while distracted by cellphones and other devices.

An estimated 399 people statewide were killed in vehicle crashes in 2016, according to the [report](#), which was released Wednesday by the National Safety Council, a nonprofit created by Congress to promote safety.

That was 13 percent higher than the 354 killed in 2015, and 15 percent higher than the 348 people killed in 2014.

Experts believe an improving economy and lower gas prices are contributing to the increase in deaths because they lead to more traffic, as more people commute to work and can afford to drive farther and take vacations.



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Mary Maguire, a spokeswoman for the American Automobile Association of Southern New England, said that distracted driving has become a major component in the fatalities.

“In our society nowadays, we look at time spent in our vehicle as time to multitask,” she said.

Drivers are often distracted by using or looking at mobile devices and screens built into their vehicles' dashboards, Maguire said.

Nationally, the report estimated, there were 40,200 driving-related fatalities last year, making it the deadliest



year on the country's roads since 2007, when there were about 41,000 deaths. The figure also marked a 6 percent increase from 2015 and a 14 percent increase from 2014, the most dramatic two-year spike in 53 years.

The state's highway safety director, Jeff Larason, called the rise in fatalities "troubling" and said state officials are "focused on driver distraction as the most problematic factor."

He said the state plans to continue to run public-awareness campaigns to urge people not to drive while distracted.

Experts said other bad habits continue to contribute to vehicle deaths, including speeding, not using a seat belt (Massachusetts has one of the lowest rates of seat-belt usage nationally), and driving while drunk or high.

Maguire of AAA said that the urge to engage in some risky driving behaviors — particularly to try to save time — may be stronger in New England than in other areas.

"We're such a go-go productive society, and we're very much in a hurry in New England so the temptation is very strong" to run a red light, speed, or text while driving, she said.

And, our region has "a significant problem with gridlock and challenging weather [that] may make drivers more impatient and stressed than they may be in other places."

"Drivers need to realign their priorities and they need to slow down and slow down not just their cars but the pace of their lives," Maguire said.

Driving deaths by state

Figures are considered to be preliminary estimates.

State	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012
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TOTAL U.S.	40,200	37,757	35,398	35,369	36,415
Alabama	1,044	846	821	840	833
Alaska	84	65	71	50	59
Arizona	950	881	768	842	817
Arkansas	545	533	467	481	545
California	3,680	3,249	3,084	3,134	2,994
Colorado	605	545	465	465	466
Connecticut	307	283	249	276	262
Delaware	119	130	125	100	116
Dist. of Columbia	28	26	26	29	19
Florida	3,037	2,955	2,501	2,352	2,442
Georgia	1,540	1,394	1,145	1,158	1,182
Hawaii	119	94	99	105	125
Idaho	253	217	186	213	185
Illinois	1,078	1,017	910	999	952
Indiana	820	817	727	780	778
Iowa	403	320	319	317	362
Kansas	431	357	385	349	409
Kentucky	830	748	666	638	743
Louisiana	661	646	630	672	670
Maine	159	156	135	144	162
Maryland	490	508	438	455	498
Massachusetts	399	354	348	334	353
Michigan	1,064	982	893	952	932
Minnesota	398	409	358	376	385
Mississippi	670	645	605	606	571
Missouri	939	862	759	756	830
Montana	190	224	192	228	204
Nebraska	217	244	221	205	211
Nevada	327	326	285	260	258
New Hampshire	137	114	92	135	105
New Jersey	607	553	563	546	591
New Mexico	398	296	372	308	351
New York	953	-	-	-	-

North Carolina	1,435	1,396	1,259	1,247	1,269
North Dakota	113	131	136	149	170
Ohio	1,129	1,105	1,011	994	1,113
Oklahoma	668	631	655	615	642
Oregon	495	446	350	314	333
Pennsylvania	1,189	1,205	1,215	1,211	1,311
Rhode Island	53	45	52	66	64
South Carolina	1,015	954	823	761	845
South Dakota	116	133	136	133	134
Tennessee	1,042	961	967	996	1,019
Texas	3,751	3,490	3,464	3,360	3,339
Utah	280	275	256	219	217
Vermont	64	57	44	70	77
Virginia	750	755	703	741	774
Washington	536	567	467	429	441
West Virginia	269	270	271	319	335
Wisconsin	592	561	498	530	601
Wyoming	112	145	149	87	120

SOURCE: National Safety Council

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