

BLIND SPOT



DANGEROUS DRIVERS SHOULD HAVE LOST THEIR LICENSES. THEY DIDN'T — AND OTHERS DIED

This story was reported by Globe staff Vernal Coleman, Matt Rocheleau, Laura Crimaldi, Evan Allen, and editor Brendan McCarthy. It was written by Coleman and Rocheleau.



**Winner of the
2021 Pulitzer Prize**

Mustafa Lynch hit the brakes as his Dodge minivan slammed into the motorcycle, its rider disappearing beneath the vehicle in a shower of sparks and broken glass.

The van idled for a second, maybe two, as Christopher Lucero lay pinned to the pavement beneath the van's frame. Then the driver sped away, witnesses said, blowing through red lights and stop signs and dragging the helpless 18-year-old more than a half mile through Providence before leaving his body in the street.

Lucero's death in April of 2017 was brutal and shocking. But the outrage it caused should be compounded by this: Lynch could have been taken off the road long before the fatal collision. If only Massachusetts officials had opened the mail.





Christopher Lucero, 18, was killed in April 2017 in a hit-and-run crash in Providence. He is buried in the city's North Burial Ground.

Lane Turner/Globe Staff

The 73-year-old Lynch, licensed in Massachusetts but living in Rhode Island, was such a bad driver that his license had already been suspended indefinitely by two other states. He should have lost his driving privileges here years earlier after Connecticut sent a letter warning that Lynch had skipped a court hearing on a moving violation. But that letter apparently was one of tens of thousands received and ignored by the Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles.

That negligence opened the door to Christopher Lucero's death.

The failures by the Massachusetts Registry, and their deadly consequences, were on display again last summer when seven motorcyclists were killed in New Hampshire in a crash with a truck driven by a man with an appalling record of moving violations — and a still-valid drivers license. But the failures at registries here and across the nation run much broader and deeper than these horrific incidents, an 11-month Globe investigation found.

Despite nearly 50 years of warnings by federal road safety officials, the United States still has no effective national system to keep tabs on drivers who commit serious offenses in another state. Enforcement relies on state agencies to do their job, which they often don't. It is a gap that puts everyone at risk every time we take to the road. Call it America's blind spot.

The Globe identified seven people, in addition to the seven motorcyclists, killed in recent years by drivers with past violations that should have stripped them of their driving privileges. They mark just the visible edge of a vast problem. There are unquestionably many more, but restrictive state rules on access to driver data make compiling a true tally almost impossible.

Still, the cases the Globe has identified are chilling. Among them:

In Maine, **+ a Tennessee truck driver** with a dozen license suspensions to his name slammed his tractor-trailer loaded with lumber into several cars in 2016, killing two motorists in a fiery crash.

In Wisconsin, a drunk Illinois man whose license should have been suspended more than a decade earlier crashed into a family heading home last year from a church supper, killing three.

In California, **+ a drunk former Marine from Massachusetts** whose license should have been suspended in the Commonwealth, crashed head-on into a motorcyclist, killing a father of two.



In 2016, Randall Weddle, a drunk truck driver with 12 previous convictions for operating under the influence, lost control of his flatbed trailer on a curve in a road in Maine and killed two people.

Police handout



In April of 2019, three members of a Kenosha County, Wis., family were killed when their car was hit by a drunk driver.
Police handout



In June of 2019, a pickup truck collided with a pack of motorcyclists on a rural, two-lane highway in the White Mountains. Seven were killed.
Miranda Thompson

These drivers, like Lynch, like the trucker who allegedly mowed down those seven motorcyclists, were driving with valid licenses, their state motor vehicle authorities unaware — often due to their own administrative negligence — that the drivers had racked up suspensions elsewhere.

“It’s incredible that something happens in one state, and then it’s forgotten or sits in a pile forever,” said Catherine Koessler, whose father, mother, and uncle were killed in the Kenosha County, Wis., crash. “If these two states can’t communicate, if they can’t manage it one way or another, it makes you wonder if anyone is managing it.”

Mustafa Lynch

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The common thread behind these tragedies — reckless motorists allowed to drive despite known offenses — indicates a much larger problem, and others who track this data agree.

+ **A major company that collects and analyzes bulk driver data** told the Globe it estimates more than one in 10 drivers across the nation has at least one offense — ranging from speeding to vehicular homicide — that isn't reflected on the official record. Another data collection company reported a similar trend. In a nation of 227 million licensed drivers, that would add up to more than 22 million unaccounted-for offenders, among them, almost certainly, thousands, perhaps millions, who should have lost their licenses, temporarily or permanently.

The US government spends billions each year to decrease traffic deaths through campaigns about distracted driving, highway maintenance, and other safety measures. But closing this basic gap in information sharing has not been a priority — and all drivers are endangered as a result.





Mourners placed flags at the memorial site where seven bikers lost their lives. Thousands of motorcyclists from all over New England rode together and convened at the crash site in July of 2019.
Erin Clark for the Boston Globe

“If you have lost your license because you’re a dangerous driver in one state,” said Jim Moran, a former US congressman from Northern Virginia, “you’re not going to become a different person when you cross into another state. ... Crossing a state line is not like coming out of the confessional booth.”

Moran proposed licensing reforms in 1998, and again in 2002, that would have created a national clearinghouse of driver records. Neither proposal made it out of committee.

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Despite decades of highway tragedy and calls for reform like Moran’s, federal oversight of the licensing of passenger car operators is nearly nonexistent. The United States counts on 50 state motor vehicle agencies, plus the District of Columbia, to police themselves and alert each other when an out-of-state driver breaks the law. Often, the Globe found, states fail in this duty: Some neglect to send warnings about dangerous drivers; some receive notices but don’t bother to read and record them, as happened here.

Even in this era of instant communication, agencies nationwide still heavily rely on mailing paper documents to notify each other about out-of-state infractions — a slow, labor-intensive process that is prone to administrative failures. Seven states — including California, Arizona, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island — have for years sent no mail notices at all, making them islands of irresponsibility in the world of highway safety.

Watch the short documentary: See the crashes, hear from those who have lost loved ones, and understand the government failings that led to these tragedies. Joshua Morin struggles to recover from a deadly New Hampshire crash. In Wisconsin, the Rizzo family suffered an unimaginable loss.

Produced by Caitlin Healy, Brendan McCarthy, and Anush Elbakyan. Shot and edited by Caitlin Healy.

14:55

The Globe reviewed thousands of pages of court records and driver histories across several states, analyzed federal and state level data, and interviewed safety advocates, state officials, and industry insiders. Reporters conducted a 50-state survey to determine the extent of state motor vehicle agency backlogs, as well as disparities in policies.

Problem cases surfaced quickly as this review proceeded, and when reporters alerted state officials with their findings, shock, and then action, followed.

Florida immediately revoked the licenses of 20 drivers with eye-popping records in Massachusetts. Maryland and Nevada officials rushed to update records and suspend licenses after learning that drivers licensed there had caused fatal accidents in other states.

Meanwhile, New Mexico launched a review into how its court system relays information about driver convictions. Officials there had failed to tell Nevada about **+ a man who had served prison time for vehicular homicide** in New Mexico but was still licensed in the nearby state.

“This is the first time something like this has been brought to my attention,” said Andrea Reeb, the New Mexico district attorney who prosecuted the fatal crash case. “I think that was just a mistake and hopefully it was just a one-time mistake.”

Federal and state privacy laws largely shield driver records from anyone outside the government and the insurance industry, making it difficult to determine how often these crashes occur.

But the Globe did analyze decades of Massachusetts driving data obtained through a records request. The findings relate to a tiny slice of the nation’s drivers but offer a clear window into the broad reach of the problem.

The review of 20 years of data found thousands of Massachusetts drivers committed traffic offenses that should have resulted in their licenses being suspended, but officials delayed posting the offenses — usually for years — to their official driving histories.



A Globe analysis found thousands of Massachusetts drivers committed traffic offenses that should have resulted in their licenses being suspended. These drivers went on to cause 766 serious crashes.
Lane Turner/Globe Staff

During the period of these delays, the drivers caused 766 serious crashes — on average, one every nine days. The crashes may have been prevented had officials not lagged in updating these drivers' records. Over 20 years, 3,182 traffic offenses were committed by these drivers before their past, suspension-triggering violations were added to their records.

The Massachusetts RMV is not the only such agency to misplace or ignore out-of-state violations, but it is the poster child for such negligence — and its consequences.

For years, RMV employees here treated sanction notices from other states as someone else's problem. Responsibility for processing the notices was transferred from department to department and manager to manager, according to auditing firm Grant Thornton, which was hired by the state to assess the agency's operation. In 2018, processing ceased altogether, leaving stacks of out-of-state driving violations to molder in cardboard banker boxes stacked in an office, five high and as many as 15 across, arranged by date and state of origin.





Years worth of unprocessed out-of-state conviction notifications were stashed and neglected by the Massachusetts Registry. This photo, taken in early 2017, shows the stacked boxes before they were sent to a warehouse.
Massachusetts Department of Transportation

Officials turned their full attention to the boxes only after last summer's fatal New Hampshire motorcycle crash exposed the glut of unprocessed alerts. Former registrar + **Erin Deveney**, who resigned days after the crash, told outside investigators that she was unaware the backlog could lead to such public safety issues.

"I cannot recall a time where an out-of-state notification, or a lack of processing, have resulted in a tragedy such as this," she said. "It is not something that was necessarily a clear risk." The risk had, in fact, been there to see for years.

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In 1989, for example, Lacey Packer, a 10-year-old Reading girl, was killed in New Hampshire by a drunk driver licensed in Massachusetts. The driver had previous out-of-state convictions that should have resulted in his license being suspended, but that went unrecorded by the Massachusetts Registry. The case sparked a huge outcry and promises of reforms. But those promises were not kept.





Joshua Packer, 9, paused following a State House signing ceremony in 1990 for a bill that sought to crack down on out-of-state drunken driving violators. The bill was named for his sister, Lacey, who was killed in 1989 by a drunk driver whose license should've been suspended.
Globe Staff File Photo

Today, Massachusetts officials are remorseful that this gap in enforcement persisted so long. “The first mistake we made is we simply did not put a high enough priority on the issue of problem drivers,” Massachusetts Secretary of Transportation + **Stephanie Pollack** said in an interview. “We were not focused enough on safety.”

Pollack acknowledged that violation notices regularly went unrecorded, outdated computer systems stalled progress, and a lax “do what you can” culture pervaded the agency.

“I can’t control what the other states are doing. My job ... is to fix the parts of the system we can fix and to basically play the cards we’ve been dealt.”

— Stephanie Pollack, secretary of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation

Meanwhile, staffers scrambled to meet Governor Charlie Baker’s campaign promise to shorten the lines at RMV offices, records show. To do so, officials scrutinized daily wait time reports and employees rushed to keep paperwork moving. Public safety took a back seat.

Deveney, the former registrar, declined requests for comment.

Since last year’s crash in New Hampshire, Pollack has tried to upend the agency’s practices. Still, keeping the roads clear of dangerous drivers relies on whether 49 other states diligently record and share word of driver sanctions. Here, Pollack said, her hands are tied.

“Yes, we need to advocate for national change, but realistically, national change is years away,” she said.



Secretary of Transportation Stephanie Pollack
Jessica Rinaldi/Globe Staff

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What would it take for Pollack to feel safe behind the wheel?

“It would be knowledge that 50 states have accurate drivers’ records for all their drivers,” she said.

That day seems distant. Backlogs of records are common in the country’s motor vehicle agencies. A national survey by the Globe found 13 states, and the District of Columbia, admitting they had accumulated records backlogs and delays in recent years, though several declined to provide details. Thirty-one said their records are up to date. Six states refused to respond.

“It’s not something states publicize,” said Karen Grim, deputy commissioner for operations for the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles, which, she said, did not have a backlog. “You just try to take care of it before it becomes a problem.”

Motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death in the United States.

Skin cancer kills about 11,650 people every year.

(Each represents one death)

Roughly 15,000 people die of prescription opioid overdoses.

And nearly 36,000 people are killed in motor vehicle crashes.

Some of these roadway deaths could easily be prevented. But state motor vehicles agencies routinely fail to track and sideline many of the nation's most dangerous drivers.

The Globe found that Massachusetts drivers who skirted license suspensions caused 766 serious crashes. And that's just the tip of the iceberg, part of a larger national problem.

There have been multiple attempts over the years to try to get state agencies to work together, to address this dangerous enforcement gap. All have come up short.

The first agreement of its kind, the Driver License Compact, debuted in 1961 with a basic premise: States should share information and match penalties when a driver incurs a violation elsewhere. But decades later, participation is mixed and there are no penalties for noncompliance. Five states, including Massachusetts, have resisted signing on to this agreement altogether.

In Massachusetts, the excuse has been this: We don't have the staff and are already struggling to address the backlog of unprocessed violations.

"We don't have the resources," Steve Evans, Massachusetts Registry director of driver licensing, told auditors last year. "And we won't sign up for something we can't do, so we really didn't have an obligation."

A more stringent version of the Driver License Compact, called the Driver License Agreement, was established by a consortium of state motor vehicle agencies in the early 2000s. But not a single state signed on to that arrangement, and it now appears to be defunct.



In a nation of 227 million licensed drivers, about 22 million could have unaccounted-for violations on their records, according to estimates from data collectors.

Lane Turner/Globe Staff

The most comprehensive network in place today is the federal Problem Driver Pointer System (PDPS), which compiles driver sanction information in a national electronic database that state agencies are required under federal law to check before issuing and renewing licenses. But even this system, administered by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, has its flaws. Most states allow

licenses to remain valid for four or more years, some even decades, without renewal — and thus without a check for out-of-state violations.

There is, too, a more basic problem: Several states, including California, which has 12 percent of the nation's motorists, send no direct mail and lean solely on the PDPS system.

Until recently, Massachusetts was a member of this club.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration declined to address several specific questions from the Globe, saying only that its "primary" role is to establish the database and provide technical assistance.

As long as gaping holes in the licensing system persist, dangerous drivers will plow right through.

Consider Timothy Vandervere, the Illinois motorist and killer of three.

Vandervere, 41, was stopped by police in Kenosha County, Wis., in 2005, cited for drunken driving, and had his license to drive in the state suspended indefinitely. Notice of the offense was duly sent to Illinois, which appears to have done nothing about it for years.

Fourteen years later, again in Kenosha County, driving about 100 miles per hour with a blood alcohol level nearly four times the legal limit, Vandervere crashed his pickup truck into a Jeep, crushing three members of Catherine Koessler's family as they headed home from a Friday fish boil. The collision sent the Jeep careening into a field, where it turned over. Killed were 76-year-old Vincent Rizzo, his wife, Mary, 74, and his brother Michael, 67. Another brother, Gerald Rizzo, 72 at the time, survived with multiple rib fractures and other injuries.



Timothy Van

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Timothy Vandervere

Wisconsin



In Vandervere's pocket, investigators found his still current — and perfectly valid — Illinois license. Months after the deadly crash, Wisconsin, as it had done a decade earlier, sent a revocation notice about Vandervere to Illinois.

"Little late," said Vincent Rizzo Jr., the oldest son of Vincent and Mary.

Authorities later discovered Vandervere had renewed his Illinois license three times since his 2005 drunken driving arrest in Wisconsin, simply by telling his home state motor vehicle agency that he had no license sanctions elsewhere. Each time, Illinois authorities took him at his word instead of checking the PDPS system for records, as they should have under federal law. If they had, they would not have renewed his license.

Vandervere now sits in prison in Wisconsin, serving out a 32-year sentence for vehicular homicide. Illinois officials can't, or won't, say what went wrong.

Brenda Glahn, an attorney for the Illinois Secretary of State, which oversees licensing, confirmed her agency hadn't checked Vandervere's history when he applied to renew his license. Glahn said the agency's computers were set to check the system only when issuing brand new licenses. The department refused to acknowledge any wrongdoing.

"We're not gonna say Wisconsin is at fault, and we're not going to say that we're at fault in this particular case," she said.

Illinois' motor vehicle agency reconfigured its computer system after the Vandervere crash, and officials said the agency now checks records when renewing licenses.

For the Rizzo family, the change is no consolation.





Janet Duemke wiped away tears on Nov. 22, 2019, in Kenosha County, Wis., while addressing a courtroom about the crash that killed her parents, Vincent and Mary Rizzo, and uncle, Michael Rizzo. Timothy Vandervere pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 32 years in prison.

Paul Williams

“In today’s day and age, there’s no reason that [a lack of] technology should be used as an excuse for not being able to have this information flow seamlessly from state to state,” Vincent Rizzo Jr. said. “People are dying because of it.”

It was yet another needless highway killing that prompted Moran, then a Virginia congressman, to introduce a bill that would have given states financial incentives to help develop an extensive national electronic system for exchanging data about offending motorists.

In 1997, Benjamin Cooper, a high school student who lived in Moran’s district, was killed by a driver whose District of Columbia license should have been revoked due to out-of-state convictions.

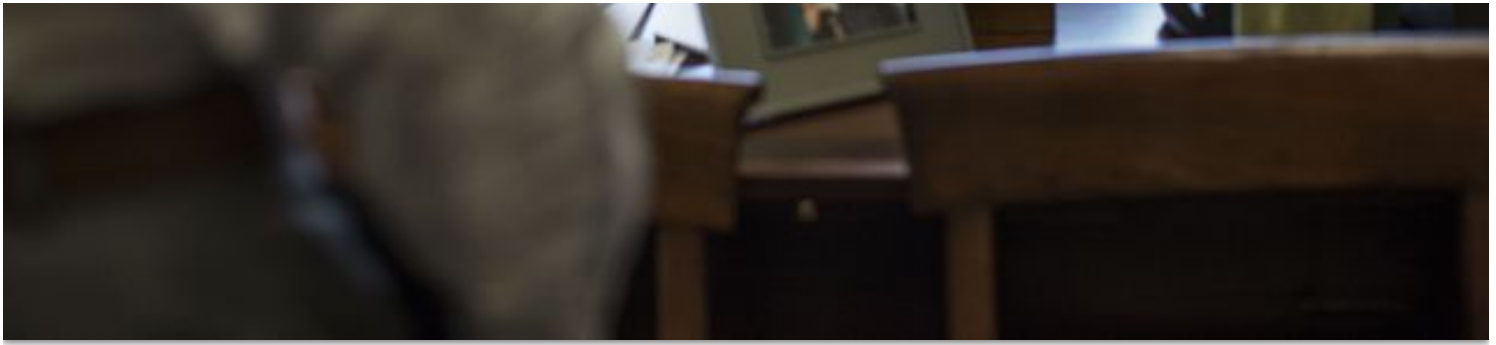
Moran is still furious about the negligence that set the stage for Cooper’s death.

“Frankly, it’s [expletive],” he said. “This never should have happened.”

In the wake of the tragedy, Moran pitched what he considered a common sense fix: push states to share accurate information immediately so they can quickly sideline dangerous drivers. His proposal, however, never even got a floor vote in Congress.

Moran tried again in 2002 to persuade Congress to approve the creation of a real-time national database, with teeth. He thought his cause would be helped by the ease with which the 9/11 hijackers had obtained identification cards and exposed weaknesses in state licensing policies.





Jim Moran of Virginia, then a US representative, in his Capitol Hill office in 2014.
Melina Mara/The Washington Post via Getty Images

He was wrong. His proposal was defeated a second time, crushed, Moran said, by overblown concerns about privacy and government inertia.

Inertia is still in charge.

“I’m shocked,” said Moran, now an attorney in private practice, “that it’s 20 years later and the system still has not been fully fixed.”

In the absence of federal leadership, a private organization has developed a powerful sway over the way state motor vehicle agencies operate. The American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators, led by a former state and federal transportation official, collects upwards of \$43 million in annual revenue from states and federal agencies to help them streamline operations. Its membership comprising state officials, the trade group aims to create a uniform licensing system and national information-sharing platform.

When the Globe launched its national survey and requested public records from each state, regulators immediately turned to the association. Anne Ferro, the organization’s president, appeared to run interference for the states, issuing a memo advising members nationwide on ways they could try to withhold the data that the Globe was seeking.

“There is no magic bullet to solve this problem. If there was, we’d have found it by now.”

— Anne Ferro, chief executive of the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators

Several states complied with her recommendations, a handful redacting without providing legal justification. Some states denied the Globe’s request altogether and suggested reporters seek the records directly from the association, which administers an electronic licensing system for commercial truckers. Only a handful of states ignored the suggestions and provided the full data.

Ferro said her group was not trying to prevent the public from knowing more about lapses in state licensing. She admitted in an interview that the vehicle regulatory system as it stands falls short of what the nation needs. She said agencies that are members of the association know dangerous drivers continue to slip through the cracks. They just haven’t come up with a comprehensive solution.

“There is no magic bullet to solve this problem,” she said. “If there was, we’d have found it by now.”

There is no magic bullet to solve this problem, she said. If there was, we'd have found it by now.

On a chilly morning last November, slightly more than two years after he was charged in the hit-and-run death of Christopher Lucero, Mustafa Lynch shuffled to the defense table in a Providence courtroom. Police had conducted a lengthy investigation, and prosecutors had prepared their criminal case. But even then, evidence of Lynch's full driving history was incomplete — because Massachusetts Registry records were deficient or missing. The system that enabled him was still trying to figure him out.

For the Lucero family, of Providence, the feelings of anger, and loss, remain raw. "It's a human under a vehicle," Ryan Lucero, Christopher's brother, told the Globe. "Words can't describe it. ... The pain will never go away."



Christopher Lucero was dislodged from the undercarriage of a minivan in April 2017 at a speed bump on Amherst Street in Providence. A fading makeshift memorial of spray-painted messages and plastic flowers remains there today.

Lane Turner/Globe Staff

As for Lynch, who along with his lawyers repeatedly declined to comment for this story, it was hard to tell.

That day in court, the 73-year-old stood hunched as he listened to the deal prosecutors were offering: In exchange for a guilty plea, he could serve one to five years on house arrest and surrender his driver's license for good.

The judge read the offer aloud and Lynch shook his head. Whispers spread through the courtroom's gallery.

His decision was a gamble. If he were to be convicted at trial, Lynch would face up to five years in prison.

The judge asked again. "Do you understand the plea offer?"

Lynch nodded. No deal.



Mustafa Lynch appeared last November in Providence Superior Court on manslaughter charges. His license suspended, Lynch left the court and drove away in a silver van with paper license plates.
John Tlumacki/Globe Staff

He left court that morning leaning heavily on his cane, a trial date set for later this year.

After trudging slowly down the courthouse steps, he hopped into the driver's seat of a Dodge minivan, turned the key, and pulled into traffic.

No one seemed to notice that the man with a suspended license and a fatal hit-and-run case pending was back on the road again.

Contact investigations@globe.com.

Saurabh Datar contributed to this report.

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