

Nine key takeaways from the Globe's 'Blind Spot' investigation

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LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

or nearly a year, Globe reporters scoured crash data and records and found that menacing drivers across the country are escaping scrutiny — and remaining on the road — due to bureaucratic neglect. These failures have been deadly.

F The Globe's "[Blind Spot](#)" investigation examines the hidden dangers on America's roads and found glaring problems with how drivers are licensed and how the trucking industry is regulated.

[Read Part I: Dangerous drivers should have lost their licenses. They didn't, and others died](#)

[Read Part II: He was a wrecking machine before the N.H. crash. Why didn't anyone stop Volodymyr Zhukovskyy?](#)

Here are some of the key takeaways from the Globe's reporting.

1. There's no system to effectively track driving offenses between states

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.

2. This has had lethal consequences

One example of this was on display last summer when seven motorcyclists were killed in New Hampshire crash. [Volodymyr Zhukovskyy](#), a 24-year-old truck driver with an atrocious record, allegedly crossed the center line and crashed into the motorcyclists. His driver's license should have been suspended at the time of the crash but remained valid due to lapses at the Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicles.

The Globe identified seven other people killed in recent years by [drivers with past violations that should have kept them off the road](#). There are unquestionably many more, but restrictive state rules on driver data make compiling a true tally almost impossible.

3. The scope of the problem is massive

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.

4. Sloppy recordkeeping, outdated communication, and neglect are to blame

The United States counts on 50 state registries, plus the District of Columbia, to police themselves and alert others 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.

And, even in this era of instant communication, agencies nationwide still rely on mailing paper documents to directly notify each other about infractions by out-of-state passenger drivers — 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 direct mail notices at all, making them islands of irresponsibility in the world of highway safety.

[Explore the data: See the scope of the nationwide problem](#)

5. There are major gaps in oversight of the increasingly deadly trucking industry

After more than a decade of declines, the frequency of [fatal crashes involving trucks](#) shot up by 41 percent between 2009 and 2017. In 2017, the last year for which complete statistics are available, 4,761 people died in crashes involving large trucks on American roads. That's one person every two hours. That's a Boeing 737 plane crash every two weeks.

And [violations among trucking companies are common](#). Recent research commissioned by trucking companies themselves suggests that 300,000 undetected drug users are currently piloting trucks.

6. Many trucks are poorly maintained to the point of peril

Federal statistics show that, on average, [one in five of the more than 4 million trucks regulated by the FMCSA is in such disrepair](#) that if it were stopped by safety inspectors, it would immediately be taken out of service.

Yet, the federal agency responsible for protecting American drivers from dangerous truckers, the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, has allowed whole swaths of the industry — most strikingly, small upstart companies — to operate with minimal or no oversight, the Globe found.

7. How did it get this way?

The FMCSA simply [lacks the firepower](#) to wrangle a sprawling industry with a fierce independent streak, which some safety advocates liken to the Wild West.

The agency employs only about 1,200 people to oversee a sector with half a million companies that is growing by more than 30,000 businesses every year. The agency has no centralized way to check the backgrounds of drivers, and drug testing requirements are inadequate.

Compliance with many of the agency's requirements is increasingly monitored remotely, often with paperwork that companies simply send in, with little verification or first-hand observation.

The FMCSA does get information from traffic stops by police and unannounced roadside inspections conducted by state regulators. But that provides a haphazard picture at best: More than a million of the 4.6 million commercial vehicles the FMCSA regulated in 2018, for example, were not stopped once through the entire year, according to federal statistics.

8. The problems are most glaring with fledgling companies

New trucking companies are required by the FMCSA to file reams of paperwork before they can open up shop, promising that they understand and will comply with regulations, [but no one from the agency makes them prove it.](#)

No one checks whether they're telling the truth about their background. There's no vehicle inspection, test, or in-person safety audit before a new company is allowed to put vehicles 20 times the size of passenger cars out on the highway.

This means that companies operate unproven during their early, formative months in business, the very time when they are most in need of oversight. Federal statistics from 2015 show that new companies have a crash rate almost 60

percent higher than established ones.

9. Attempts to bolster trucking oversight have also fallen short

The National Transportation Safety Board sees itself as “the conscience and the compass of the transportation industry,” [but it doesn't regulate the industry](#). Since 1971, the federal agency has been issuing and reissuing the same plaintive warning: The regulatory system that is supposed to keep trucking safe is full of loopholes that cost lives.

In 2020, the Department of Transportation spent 25 times more overseeing aviation than trucking, reflecting, in part, the headline-grabbing nature of plane crashes that make air safety a national focus. By contrast, trucking disasters that kill two or four or six at a time rarely capture the nation's attention, and there is little public pressure for change.

[Read the entire “Blind Spot” investigation.](#)

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