

Older Driver Safety

More than 12% of the U.S. population is 65 or older. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), there were 32.2 million older licensed drivers in 2008—representing about 15% of all licensed drivers.

As we age, physical changes affect our ability to drive safely. Eyesight, one of the most critical aspects of driving, begins to deteriorate after age 40. Reaction time and flexibility also diminish as we age. NHTSA states that physical changes and decreased ability due to disease may alter the performance level of critical skills needed to drive. In 2008, 183,000 older adults were injured in traffic crashes, while older drivers accounted for 15% of all traffic fatalities. Although older drivers are involved in fewer crashes overall than younger drivers, their fatal crash rate per miles traveled increases after age 75.

Despite the statistics, many older adults continue to drive safely. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), the fatal crash rate for older adults has dropped by 37%. Among drivers over 80, the rate has dropped even more drastically—by 47%.

Age alone does not necessarily predict fatality or crash rates. In a University of Michigan study, “able older drivers” had fewer fatalities when rates were proportionally corrected for licensed drivers (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2003). By learning to recognize the warning signs of impaired driving and identify risk factors, such as weather/road conditions and driver health/motor functioning, law enforcement and community groups can develop strategies to reduce motor vehicle crash-related injuries among older adults.

Aging Facts

The number of people living in America age 65 and older rose to 39.5 million in 2009. (U.S. Census Bureau, “Annual Estimates of the Resident Population by Sex and Selected Age Group for the U.S.: April 1, 2000 to July 1, 2009”)

The 65-and-over population will increase from 40 million in 2010 to 55 million in 2020. By 2030, almost 20% of the U.S. population will be 65 or older. (Administration on Aging, *A Profile of Older Americans: 2009*) (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2000)

According to U.S. census data, just under 7 million people age 85 and over live in America. This figure is expected to grow to 19 million in the next four decades.

In 2009, persons reaching age 65 had an average life expectancy of an additional 18.6 years (19.8 years for women and 17.1 years for men). (Administration on Aging, *A Profile of Older Americans: 2009*)

In 2008, older women outnumbered older men at a ratio of 22.4 million to 16.5 million. 42% of older women were widows. (Administration on Aging, *A Profile of Older Americans: 2009*)

Crash Statistics

Auto crash deaths among drivers age 70 and older fell 21% from 1997 to 2006. (National Institute on Aging, 2009)

A total of 3,981 people age 70 and older died in motor vehicle crashes in 2009—a 32% decrease since 1997. (IIHS, *Fatality Facts 2009*)

In 2008, older adults made up 15% of all traffic fatalities, 14% of all vehicle occupant fatalities, and 18% of all pedestrian fatalities. (NHTSA, *Traffic Safety Facts: 2008 Data*)

75% of people who die in crashes involving older drivers are the drivers themselves or their older passengers. The increase in fatal crashes involving drivers age 75 and older is attributed mostly to fragility due to age. (National Institute on Aging, 2009) (IIHS, *Fatality Facts 2009*)

In two-vehicle fatal crashes involving an older and a younger driver, the vehicle driven by the older driver is nearly twice as likely to be the one struck. (NHTSA, *Traffic Safety Facts: 2008 Data*)

Drivers age 65 and over killed in car crashes are significantly more likely to die of chest injury than younger drivers (47.3% vs. 24%). (Dr. Richard Kent et al., “On the fatal crash experience of older drivers,” University of Virginia, 2005)

In 2008, most traffic fatalities involving older drivers occurred during the day (80%), on weekdays (72%), and involved other vehicles (69%). (NHTSA, *Traffic Safety Facts: 2008 Data*)

Older drivers are over-represented in intersection crashes, while merging and overtaking, and in angle crashes—especially left-hand turns. (IIHS, *Older Drivers Q&A*, 2010)

Training Issues

Law enforcement officers need to be trained about aging—how it affects older adults, society as a whole, and law enforcement services delivery. They especially need to understand how an older driver population impacts traffic safety.



One aging issue officers need to recognize is dementia and its warning signs. They require sensitivity training that focuses on the needs of an aging community.

Law Enforcement's Role

According to International Association of Chiefs of Police, older driver issues cross all four phases of crash prevention: education, engineering, enforcement, and evaluation. (*Highway Safety Desk Book*, 2004) The suggestions below can be tailored to help your agency establish or improve older driver safety programs.

Education

- ★ Use radio and TV public service announcements to educate older drivers about driving hazards, make them aware of their limitations, and encourage them to adjust driving behaviors accordingly.
- ★ Create advertisements with links to driver safety and training information on social media sites such as Facebook. Filters allow you to target your message to desired age groups.
- ★ Provide officers and deputies with regular training on older driver issues. Topics should include the warning signs of dementia as well as tools for properly interacting with dementia sufferers. Contact your local Alzheimer's Foundation chapter for assistance.
- ★ Develop safety videos or slide presentations to present to older-adult organizations, including religious groups and social clubs.
- ★ Organize or strengthen Triads.

- ★ Act as a referral resource to link older people, adult children, and community outreach systems.
- ★ Build older adult service coalitions to channel community resources to older adults in need.

Engineering

- ★ Inform city traffic planners of the needs of older adult drivers and pedestrians. Suggestions include bigger road signs, longer pedestrian crosswalk times, refuge islands for those unable to cross the street during one signal cycle, and high-visibility crosswalks with lighting or reflectors.

Enforcement

- ★ Be alert to drivers who appear lost, confused, or incapacitated, stopping them to inquire about their welfare. Drivers who appear to suffer from dementia should not be allowed to continue driving.
- ★ Cite offenders. The scope of the problem is likely understated because officers are reluctant to take enforcement action against “grandma and grandpa.”
- ★ Policies for retesting older and/or impaired drivers vary by state. Know your state’s referral process for driver’s licensing retesting and establish a departmental policy for requesting re-examinations of unfit drivers.

Evaluation

- ★ Analyze crashes involving older drivers and work closely with highway engineers and local officials to evaluate the need for changes in traffic control devices, warning signs, and traffic patterns.

The Older Driver’s Responsibilities

- ★ Avoid driving at night, in bad weather, or under other stressful conditions.
- ★ Maintain your health: Get regular check-ups and vision screenings. Eat a healthy diet and stay physically fit.
- ★ Know your meds: Ask your doctor if any of your medications could affect driving.
- ★ Avoid distractions such as adjusting the radio, eating, talking on the phone, or texting while driving.
- ★ Plan travel routes in advance.
- ★ Update your vehicle: Features such as large mirrors, power windows and locks, and automatic transmission may help you overcome physical limitations.
- ★ Never drink alcohol and drive.
- ★ Maintain your vehicle. Check windshields and mirrors, tire tread, and lights. Get regular tune-ups.



Know the warning signs!

Consult your doctor if you experience unusual concentration or memory problems, or other physical symptoms that could affect your ability to drive safely. If you notice any of the warning signs below, consider having your driving assessed by a professional or attending a driver refresher class:

- ★ Fearful driving.
- ★ Frequent dents and scrapes on your vehicle, fences, mailboxes, garage doors, or curbs.
- ★ Difficulty staying in one lane or paying attention to signals, road signs, and pavement markings.
- ★ Frequent “close calls.”
- ★ Other drivers often honk at you or you often become angry at other drivers.
- ★ Friends and relatives avoid riding with you.
- ★ Frequent traffic tickets or warnings.
- ★ Difficulty turning to check over your shoulder when backing up or changing lanes.

Resources

Administration on Aging

Public Inquiries Unit
330 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201
(202) 619-0724
Eldercare Locator: (800) 677-1116
TDD: (800) 877-8339
www.aoa.gov

American Association of Retired Persons

601 E Street, NW
Washington, DC 20049
(888) 687-2277
www.aarp.org/home-garden/transportation/driver_safety/
www.aarp.org/findacourse
www.aarp.driversafety.org

American Automobile Association

Foundation for Traffic Safety

www.seniordrivers.org

Carfit

www.AAA.com/seniors

American Medical Association

www.ama-assn.org/ama/pub/physician-resources/public-health/promoting-healthy-lifestyles/geriatric-health/older-driver-safety/resources-patients.shtml

American Occupational Therapists Association

4720 Montgomery Lane
Bethesda, MD 20824-1220
(301) 652-7711
www.aota.org/olderdriver

National Association of Triads, Inc.

www.nationaltriad.org/Older_Driver_Materials.htm

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Injury Prevention: Older Road Users

Manuals and brochures for physicians, community groups, and older drivers
www.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/olddrive/

National Older Driver Research and Training Center

NTI-121
1200 New Jersey Avenue SE
Washington, DC 20590
Fax: (202) 366-7394
www.nhtsa.dot.gov

Process and Outcomes Evaluation of Older Driver Screening Programs: The Assessment of Driving-Related Skills (ADReS) Older-Driver Screening Tool

This study examines the effectiveness of ADReS in identifying older drivers who may or may not be at increased risk for unsafe driving.

www.nhtsa.gov/DOT/NHTSA/Traffic%20Injury%20Control/Articles/Associated%20Files/811113.pdf

Physician's Guide to Assessing and Counseling Older Drivers

www.nhtsa.gov/people/injury/olddrive/physician_guide/PhysiciansGuide.pdf
This guide helps doctors and patients explore driving using a health-based model. A set of screening tools explores visual, physical and motor, and cognitive functions. The guide also offers physician's guidance on actions to take for patients who present with "red flags."

Safercar.gov

www.safercar.gov

National Institute on Aging Alzheimer's Disease Education and Referral Center

PO Box 8250
Silver Spring, MD 20907
(800) 438-4380
www.alzheimers.org/index.html

National Mobility Equipment Dealers Association

3327 West Bearss Avenue
Tampa, FL 33618
(800) 833-0427
www.nmeda.org

National Sheriffs' Association

1450 Duke Street
Alexandria, VA 22314-3490
(800) 424-7827
www.sheriffs.org

