

The New York Times

## Wheels

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### Drug Use Rises in Fatal Accidents

By *JIM MOTAVALLI*

A new report by the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) shows that there has been an increasing presence of drugs in fatal accidents since 2005.

The report, presented at a news conference on Tuesday, looked at state data involving 21,798 drivers killed in auto accidents in 2009, 63 percent of whom (13,801) were tested for drugs after their deaths. The report found 3,952 testing positive for “drug involvement,” or 18 percent of the total drivers.

The administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, David L. Strickland, left, and the director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy, Gil Kerlikowske.

The report by the safety agency was the first analysis of drug involvement among fatal crash victims, using data from the states provided through the [Fatality Analysis Reporting System](#), and it examined drug testing information going back five years. The rise of drug use in traffic fatalities has been fairly steady, the report showed: It was 13 percent in 2005, 15 percent in 2006, 16 percent in 2007 and 18 percent in 2008.

The report doesn't provide all the answers. There's no uniform protocol for drug testing at the state level and no established drug impairment level, so there's no data on which legal or illegal drugs were present or whether and how they might have affected the drivers.

But in an interview, David L. Strickland, administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, said, “Drug presence has clearly risen since 2005, and it's an easy extrapolation to say that some of that drug use may have impacted driving. But we can't say people were impaired with scientific certainty that could stand up in a court of law.”

He added, “Should we aim at developing scientific and legal levels of impairment, so we can prove that impact beyond a legal doubt? Absolutely we should.”

Mr. Strickland pointed to 17 consecutive quarters of fatality and injury reduction on the highways. Some 34,000 people died on the roads in 2009, a lower level that Mr. Strickland associated with safer cars, safer roads, a successful program fighting distracted driving and a growing sense among the impaired that they should “find another way home.”

In 2009, the safety agency issued the National Roadside Survey of Drug and Alcohol Use by Drivers, which contained data from random stops of drivers in 300 locations around the country in 2007. Drug and alcohol tests were administered, and they revealed that alcohol was the most likely intoxicant, but among night stops 8.6 percent of the total tested had used

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**marijuana, 3.9 percent had used cocaine and 1.3 percent tested positive for methamphetamine.**

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# The Washington Post

## Gov't: Drugs were in 1 in 5 drivers killed in 2009

By KEN THOMAS  
The Associated Press  
Tuesday, November 30, 2010; 11:58 AM

WASHINGTON -- About 1 in 5 drivers who were killed last year in car crashes tested positive for drugs, raising concerns about the impact of drugs on auto safety, the government reported Tuesday.

Researchers with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said the new data underscored a growing problem of people driving with drugs in their systems. But they cautioned that it was not clear that drugs caused the crashes and more research was needed to determine how certain drugs can hinder a person's ability to drive safely.

Drugs were reported in nearly 4,000 drivers who were killed in 2009, or 18 percent of the nearly 22,000 drivers killed last year. In 2005, drugs were found in the systems of 13 percent of the more than 27,000 drivers killed in car accidents.

Researchers said the numbers could be higher because only about 3 in 5 drivers who were killed in car crashes were tested for drugs after the crash and testing varied from state to state. Among all the drivers who were killed in 2009 and later tested by authorities for drugs, about one-third had drugs in their systems.

"Drugged driving is as inexcusable as drunk driving or driving irresponsibly," said NHTSA administrator David Strickland.

Researchers are just beginning to understand the problem. Strickland said the data did not allow them to know whether the influence of drugs caused the fatal crashes. He said testing procedures were evolving and many states and communities test for different drugs or use different types of tests.

The tests took into account both legal and illegal drugs, including heroin, methadone, morphine, cocaine, methamphetamine, marijuana, LSD, prescription drugs and inhalants. The amount of time the drug could linger in the body varied by drug type, the researchers said, so it was unclear when the drivers had used the drugs prior to the fatal crashes.

Aspirin, nicotine, alcohol and drugs administered after the crash were excluded from the tests.

White House Drug Policy Director [Gil Kerlikowske](#) said the research was a "good first attempt" to understand the role that drug use plays in automobile fatalities.

Many drugs can affect a driver's judgment and reaction time but researchers are still trying to determine the level of drug use that can impair a driver's ability to drive safely. A blood alcohol level of 0.08 is the legal limit for all 50 states but a similar level of impairment is uncertain for many drugs.

"It's very clear that we've got a significant problem," Kerlikowske said. "We've made great progress on alcohol-impaired driving through education and enforcement. There's just no reason we won't be able to make progress in this area once we start bringing it to people's attention and we start doing the enforcement that's needed."

Some recent high-profile crashes have involved drug use by drivers.

In July 2009, a New York mother sped the wrong way for more than a mile with a minivan full of children, leading to a crash that killed her and seven others. The woman had a blood-alcohol level 2 1/2 times the legal limit and had smoked marijuana within an hour of the crash.

In Phoenix, the driver of a dump truck struck a group of motorcycle riders in March, killing four people and injuring five others. Initial tests found the driver had methamphetamine in his system.

Kerlikowske said efforts against drugged driving could be helped by improved testing procedures and standards for detecting drug use by drivers, along with more police officers trained to detect drug use by motorists.

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# The Washington Post

## Drug use increasingly common in driver deaths

By Ashley Halsey III  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
Tuesday, November 30, 2010; 5:48 PM

Evidence of drug use is increasingly being found among drivers who die in automobile accidents, according to [new research](#) by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Although fatalities involving alcohol have garnered far more attention, an NHTSA report issued Tuesday indicates that drug use by drivers who died increased by 5 percentage points from 2005 to 2009. The study drew no conclusion about whether the accidents resulted from drug use, which included legal and illegal drugs.

Nationally, drugs were found in 18 percent of dead drivers in 2009. The number was slightly lower in Virginia (16 percent) and higher in Maryland (25 percent) and the District (30 percent).

"Drug involvement does not necessarily imply impairment or indicate that drug use was the cause of the crash," NHTSA Administrator David Strickland said. "While it's clear that science and state policies regarding drugs and driving are evolving, one fact is indisputable. If you are taking any drugs that might impair your ability to drive safely, then you need to . . . give your keys to someone else. It doesn't matter if it's drugs or alcohol; if you're impaired, don't drive."

Overall, 3,952 dead drivers tested positive for drug use last year. Strickland said that some states do far more drug testing of victims than others and that many drivers who die are not tested.

Legal and illegal drugs were found during autopsies. As recorded by the nation's [Fatality Analysis Reporting System](#), they included narcotics, depressants, stimulants, hallucinogens, cannabinoids, phencyclidines (PCPs), anabolic steroids and inhalants.

Of the total of [33,808 people who died on the roadways last year](#), 17,640 were driving.

"Every driver on the road has a personal responsibility to operate his or her vehicle with full and uncompromised attention on the driving task," Strickland said. "Today's report provides a warning signal that too many Americans are driving after having taken drugs, not realizing the potential for putting themselves and others on the highway at risk."

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