

3-year freeway fatality toll: 207

Ariz. exceeds U.S. death rate by 61%

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DAVID KADLUBOWSKI/THE REPUBLIC

This interchange connects Interstate 17 to Loop 101 in north Phoenix. The Valley's interstates, including I-17, had higher concentrations of fatalities than Loop 101 and other state routes. Experts say that's because the interstates are straighter, so drivers take more chances.

On the afternoon of Jan. 8, 2015, the driver of a black Hyundai sedan rear-ended another vehicle on Loop 101 near Broadway Road. An 84-year-old passenger in the sedan died of injuries from the impact. It was the first fatal accident on a Valley freeway that year.

Less than a week later, during the afternoon of Jan. 14, the driver of a Chevrolet pickup tried to change lanes on Interstate 10 near 51st Avenue, sideswiping a Toyota sedan and ejecting a 56-year-old passenger from the car. The woman, who was not wearing a seat belt, died of her injuries.

Ten days later, on a Saturday night, a Chevrolet station wagon rear-ended a Toyota sedan in a five-car accident on I-10 near 16th Street. An 85-year-old passenger in the Toyota died.

These deaths are part of a string of fatal collisions that plague Maricopa County freeways. From 2013-15, a fatal freeway accident occurred in the Valley about every five days, leaving 207 people dead.

Fatalities on Arizona's urban freeways and interstates occur at a rate 61 percent higher than the national average, according to 2013 data from Federal Highway Administration and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. That average is determined by dividing the number of fatalities by the number of miles driven on a particular roadway each year.

Over the past three years, drivers and their passengers died on Valley freeways at every time of day, on every day of the week and on every major freeway. An Arizona Republic analysis of Arizona Department of Transportation collision data on Valley freeways from 2013-15 revealed some patterns:

The most fatal crashes occurred in May, June and July.

Fifty-two percent of fatal collisions occurred on a Friday, Saturday or Sunday.

The hours of 4 a.m. and 11 p.m. had the most fatal crashes.

Accidents involving just one vehicle are most common, making up about 42 percent of fatal wrecks.

Of the 196 fatal accidents, 109 occurred on Interstate 10 and Interstate 17.

Fatal incidents decreased significantly from 2013 to 2014, but increased slightly in 2015.

What do these trends reveal? Nothing, according to Arizona Department of Public Safety officials.

“There’s just so many variables out there to come to some sort of reasonable certainty or conclusion,” DPS Capt. Damon Cecil said.

But the crash data does show one recurring cause of fatal wrecks.

It wasn’t road flaws. It wasn’t the weather.

It was a human choice — or a sequence of choices — that separated life and death on Valley freeways.

‘It will save your life’

A 59-year-old man, his girlfriend and three teenage passengers in the backseats were traveling home to the East Valley after a birthday party in Payson on Jan. 20, 2013, when the left rear tire in their 1996 Ford Explorer blew. It sounded like a gunshot, the woman told investigators.

When DPS troopers arrived near the Loop 101 and U.S. 60 interchange seven minutes later, the SUV was on its side. The driver and his girlfriend were trapped inside, and the three teenagers, who were ejected, lay in the middle of the freeway.

The driver was pronounced dead at the scene. His girlfriend was taken to the hospital with bruises and scrapes but was soon discharged.

The woman's daughter suffered severe head and torso injuries and died about an hour later at Maricopa Medical Center. The girl's best friend had a lacerated liver and two punctured lungs. The other teenage passenger fractured multiple facial bones, injured his eyes and bled internally.

The driver and his girlfriend wore seat belts, but the three back-seat passengers did not, investigators determined.

Seat-belt use would not have prevented the tire failure. It would not have stopped the vehicle from rolling and hitting a guardrail. But it might have kept the teenagers inside the vehicle during the crash, possibly saving one life and lessening the injuries of two others.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ejection from a vehicle in a crash is 30 times more likely for those not wearing a seat belt, and more than 75 percent of people ejected during a fatal crash die.

About half of the 207 people killed on Maricopa County freeways from 2013-15 did not use a safety device.

DPS officials said increasing the use of seat belts is critical to combating the Valley's fatality rates.

"You don't know what's going to happen. Some of these collisions and some of these fatalities, these people died and it wasn't their fault. Something else caused the collision," Cecil said.

Arizonans used seat belts 86.6 percent of the time in 2015, which was lower than the national average of 88.5 percent, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Nationally, seat-belt use has increased since 2000. But seat-belt use is lower in states such as Arizona, where troopers cannot pull someone over solely because they are not wearing a seat belt.

If troopers pull a vehicle over for another reason, they can cite drivers if front-seat passengers or anyone under 16 years old is not wearing a seat belt. Backseat passengers over 16 are not required to wear seat belts. But they should, Cecil said. "We have lost so many lives on Arizona highways because backseat passengers were not restrained and they get ejected from the vehicle in a collision. Occupant restraints, even though it may not be the law and they may not be required, it will save your life," Cecil said.

A less-safe mode of travel

As with seat belts, the law does not demand the use of helmets for motorcycle drivers and passengers. Using one may not prevent death due to the high rates of speed on freeways, but simply riding a motorcycle on a freeway increases the chances that a person will lose his or her life.

On Jan. 18, 2014, about 10 minutes before noon, a 56-year-old woman lost control of her maroon Harley-Davidson motorcycle while attempting to navigate the curve on I-10 near the Loop 202 exit.

She was in the HOV lane but drifted left across the yellow line and onto the shoulder, where she hit a guardrail. Witnesses told DPS troopers that the woman flew off her bike and tumbled three times in the air before hitting a wooden pole and falling into the median.

She was pronounced dead at Maricopa Medical Center.

Although motorcycles make up about 4 percent of all registered vehicles in the state, they were involved in 22 percent of fatal accidents on Maricopa County freeways from 2013-15.

“It’s a big deal,” said Mick Degn, chairman of the Arizona Motorcycle Safety and Awareness Foundation. He said almost all motorcycle riders know someone who died or has been seriously injured in a motorcycle crash.

Degn helped found the organization in 2011 after two of his friends died in motorcycle crashes, he said.

“I had a motorcycle business and rode as a hobby, but I was seeing too many people getting either injured or killed on motorcycles,” Degn said.

He believes the main causes of motorcycle crashes are other drivers who don’t see motorcycles, as well as riders who use alcohol or drugs, drive too fast or lack training. Degn said his group estimates that 40 percent of motorcycle riders don’t have a motorcycle endorsement on their license.

“A lot of motorcyclists will say, ‘The reason I had a motorcycle accident is because of a car,’ ” Degn said. “Well, a good percentage of the motorcycle accidents are because of the motorcycle rider.” Degn’s organization tries to educate drivers to be more aware of motorcyclists, but the focus is training courses for riders.

“I ride a motorcycle, and I take a course about every two years. It’s so easy to get into bad habits when you’re out there riding,” he said.

Additionally, Degn said he always wears a helmet, and he encourages riders to buy “good” helmets — ones that are U.S. Department of Transportation compliant. But, he admits that when he was young, “I thought it was cool not to ride with one,” and he knows many riders who choose not to wear one.

Nationwide, 60.7 percent of motorcyclists used helmets that complied with federal standards in 2015, according to the NHTSA. But in states that do not have a mandatory helmet law, such as Arizona, the rate of use of such helmets was just 42.9 percent.

Sometimes, helmets are not enough to protect motorcyclists from severe injury on freeways, however.

The NHTSA estimates that helmets would have changed the outcome of about 37 percent of motorcycle-rider fatalities and 41 percent of passenger fatalities.

“On interstates where you’re doing 75 mph — you’re going very, very fast — and if you have a catastrophic equipment failure ... or even if someone doesn’t see you and cuts you off, it’s going to be devastating on your body,” Cecil said.

Fewer vehicles, faster speeds

On the Friday before the Fourth of July weekend, state Trooper Robert Olshaskie navigated an unmarked dark blue Dodge Charger onto a section of Interstate 17.

He was looking for aggressive drivers — the type who weave through traffic, split lanes, tailgate and blow past the speed limit by 20 mph or more.

“People do that all day,” Olshaskie said.

The usual bumper-to-bumper rush-hour traffic on I-17 thinned out early, leaving gaps among the motorists.

Olshaskie drove north on a shoulderless section north of Grand Avenue that troopers call “The Ditch,” keeping pace with a knot of cars doing 63 mph in a 55 mph zone.

Within four minutes, a white Chevrolet Malibu passed him on the left. Olshaskie moved behind the car and followed it at 78 mph. A short while later, the Malibu revved to 89 mph.

Olshaskie ticketed the driver for doing 85 mph and driving on a suspended license. He gave the driver a curbside lecture about the dangers of speeding and reckless driving, and impounded his car.

“He didn’t even know how fast he was going. He never looked,” Olshaskie said.

Speeding ranks among the top factors that make the region’s freeways dangerous, said Highway Patrol Sgt. James Burton.

The highest concentration of fatalities were on U.S. 60, I-10 and I-17, which are the busiest freeways in the Valley. But they share other similar features: They are straight and wide, and they are jammed during rush hours and loose otherwise.

In contrast, the turning and curvy Loop 101, Loop 202, Loop 303 and State Route 51 account for fewer fatalities per freeway mile. The difference, according to experts, is that during non-rush hours, drivers push speed and take greater chances on straight freeways because they appear safe.

Fatalities, however, spike during noncommuter hours, when the heavily used roads are less jammed and vehicles can easily reach speeds of 80 mph or more.

Almost half of fatal collisions from 2013-15 involved a single vehicle. These accidents are caused by many factors, including equipment failure. When drivers cruise at high speeds, it is more difficult to recover from an unexpected issue such as a tire blowout.

Drivers traveling at those speeds have little hope for recovery should an unexpected hazard appear in the road or a vehicle malfunction occur and send the car into a barrier.

“Drugs and alcohol play a role in it. Individuals not wearing their seat belts. People driving too fast. Those, in my opinion, are the three biggest factors in deaths on the freeway,” Burton said.

Tough laws, persistent problem

A 57-year-old Phoenix resident was driving his new copper-colored 2017 Harley-Davidson motorcycle on I-17 about 12:15 a.m. on a Tuesday in February when a white sedan plowed into the back of his bike, throwing him several hundred feet forward. He did not survive the crash. The driver of the car, Leith Monroe, was drunk, according to DPS officials. Troopers found several empty bottles of alcohol in his vehicle, and a witness said Monroe, who was 33 years old at the time, appeared to “stumble around” when she got out of her car. She faces a manslaughter charge in Maricopa County Superior Court.

Despite national and local efforts to quash drinking and driving — and some of the toughest DUI penalties in the nation — nearly 60 percent of fatal Valley freeway accidents from 2013-15 involved alcohol.

“It’s 2016, we’ve got Uber, we’ve got the light rail, we’ve got every other option but that one, and unfortunately, that’s the option that ends up in 60 percent of those fatalities. It’s an incredibly unfortunate situation that we’re facing here in the Valley,” said Halley McIntyre, programs manager for Mothers Against Drunk Driving in Arizona.

In the past decade, drunken-driving fatalities have declined by about 30 percent nationally. But the numbers are still too high, McIntyre said.