Original Article

Older driver involvements in police reported crashes and fatal crashes: trends and projections

S Lyman, S A Ferguson, E R Braver, A F Williams

Objectives: Older drivers have become a larger part of the driving population and will continue to do so as the baby boomers reach retirement age. The purpose of this study was to identify the potential effects of this population increase on highway safety.

Methods: Driver involvement rates for all police reported crashes were calculated per capita, per licensed driver, and per vehicle-mile of travel for 1990 and 1995. Also, driver involvement rates for fatal crashes were calculated for 1983, 1990, and 1995. Based on current crash rates per licensed driver and estimates of the future number of licensed drivers, projections of crashes involving drivers aged 65 and older were made for years 2010, 2020, and 2030.

Results: Driver crash involvement rates per capita decreased with age, but fatal involvement rates per capita increased starting at age 70. The same pattern existed for involvement rates per licensed driver. For both all crashes and fatal crashes, involvement rates per mile driven increased appreciably at age 70. Using projections of population growth, it was estimated that for all ages there will be a 34% increase in the number of drivers involved in police reported crashes and a 39% increase in the number involved in fatal crashes between 1999 and 2030. In contrast, among older drivers, police reported crash involvements are expected to increase by 178% and fatal involvements may increase by 155% by 2030. Drivers aged 65 and older will account for more than half of the total increase in fatal crashes and about 40% of the expected increase in all crash involvements; they are expected to account for as much as 25% of total driver fatalities in 2030, compared with 14% presently.

Conclusions: By most measures, older drivers are at less risk of being involved in police reported crashes but at higher risk of being in fatal crashes. Although any projections of future crash counts have inherent uncertainty, there is strong evidence that older drivers will make up a substantially larger proportion of drivers involved in fatal crashes by 2030 because of future increases in the proportion of the population aged 65 and older, and trends toward increased licensure rates and higher annual mileage among older persons. Countermeasures to reduce the anticipated death toll among older drivers should address the increased susceptibility to injury of older vehicle occupants in crashes.

As more of the US population reaches ages 65 and older, public concern grows about the potential effect on traffic safety. As people age, they tend to have deteriorating visual, cognitive, and perceptual functions that could lead to an increase in crash risk. Nevertheless, the crash rates for older drivers are lower per capita than for drivers of other ages because older drivers are less often licensed and drive fewer miles. Many older drivers report limiting their driving, especially to avoid challenging driving situations such as peak travel times and night-time driving. Despite this self regulation, older drivers, particularly those older than 75, are at increased risk of crash involvement per mile driven. In addition, age related physiological changes increase the likelihood that when older drivers are involved in crashes, they will die from their injuries. A recent study estimated that relative to drivers aged 30–59, drivers aged 70–74 were twice as likely to die when involved in a crash. Among drivers aged 80 and older, the risk of death per crash was about five times as high.

People born in the early 1900s reached driving age during the early years of American motorization. Subsequent generations have more lifetime driving experience than previous generations. Li et al found that fatality risk among older drivers has declined for each subsequent generation; in contrast, an upward trend was observed among adolescents and young adults. The decline in fatality risk among older drivers is thought to result from a complex mixture of behavioral and environmental factors. With more older people now licensed to drive and driving more miles than in the past, it is unclear if this trend will continue.

Williams and Carsten examined crash rates among older drivers (aged 65 and older) and projected that although many more older drivers would be involved in fatal crashes in 2010 and 2030, they still would represent a relatively small part of the overall crash problem. The present study examined trends in crash involvement and death as a function of age and provided estimates, based on more recent data, of the future contribution of older drivers to the overall motor vehicle crash problem.

Methods
This study included only passenger vehicle drivers. For the remainder of this paper, the term “driver” refers to passenger vehicle drivers.

Fatal crashes were identified using the Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) for 1983, 1990, and 1995, the most recent years for which travel data were available from the Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey (NPTS). FARS is a census of police reported fatal crashes that occur on public roads in the United States in which a death results within 30 days of the crash. Police reported crashes were identified for years 1990 and 1995 using the General Estimates System

Abbreviations: FARS, Fatality Analysis Reporting System; FHWA, Federal Highway Administration; GES, General Estimates System; NPTS, Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey; VMT, vehicle-miles of travel
Table 1  Population, licensed drivers, VMT, police reported crash involvements, and fatal crash involvements, 1995

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Licensed drivers</th>
<th>VMT (in millions)</th>
<th>Average VMT per driver</th>
<th>All police reported crashes</th>
<th>Fatal crashes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Driver involvements</td>
<td>Per 100000 population</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–19</td>
<td>14,401,118</td>
<td>9,065,465</td>
<td>60,308</td>
<td>6625</td>
<td>1467,682</td>
<td>10919</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20–24</td>
<td>17,982,119</td>
<td>15,523,445</td>
<td>16,142</td>
<td>10397</td>
<td>1545,517</td>
<td>8959</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–29</td>
<td>18,904,773</td>
<td>18,056,837</td>
<td>24,553</td>
<td>13598</td>
<td>1369,734</td>
<td>7245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–34</td>
<td>21,825,415</td>
<td>20,283,723</td>
<td>31,341</td>
<td>15452</td>
<td>1297,425</td>
<td>5945</td>
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<td>35–39</td>
<td>22,259,531</td>
<td>20,659,060</td>
<td>29,975</td>
<td>14509</td>
<td>1201,943</td>
<td>5425</td>
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<tr>
<td>40–44</td>
<td>20,254,974</td>
<td>18,679,877</td>
<td>25,956</td>
<td>13677</td>
<td>1012,016</td>
<td>4955</td>
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<tr>
<td>45–49</td>
<td>17,457,759</td>
<td>16,871,673</td>
<td>23,038</td>
<td>13640</td>
<td>8261,71</td>
<td>4732</td>
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<tr>
<td>50–54</td>
<td>13,641,557</td>
<td>12,891,029</td>
<td>16,028</td>
<td>12434</td>
<td>7153,75</td>
<td>4188</td>
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<td>55–59</td>
<td>11,085,989</td>
<td>10,225,111</td>
<td>13,345</td>
<td>10126</td>
<td>3920,31</td>
<td>3635</td>
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<td>60–64</td>
<td>10,064,058</td>
<td>9,289,261</td>
<td>8,632</td>
<td>9071</td>
<td>3282,93</td>
<td>3268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>65–69</td>
<td>9,925,554</td>
<td>8,482,889</td>
<td>71,570</td>
<td>8437</td>
<td>2843,39</td>
<td>2865</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70–74</td>
<td>8,830,967</td>
<td>7,284,698</td>
<td>49,409</td>
<td>6783</td>
<td>2530,04</td>
<td>2866</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>75–79</td>
<td>6,700,096</td>
<td>5,040,377</td>
<td>25,319</td>
<td>5021</td>
<td>1878,28</td>
<td>2803</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>80+</td>
<td>8,125,992</td>
<td>4,244,169</td>
<td>10,956</td>
<td>2581</td>
<td>1605,73</td>
<td>1967</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*General Estimates System; †Fatality Analysis Reporting System.*
Driver involvement rates for all police reported crashes remained relatively constant between 1990 and 1995. The highest involvement rates were among the youngest drivers and gradually decreased throughout life, with the lowest rate for drivers aged 75 and older (fig 1, table 1). In 1983, driver involvement rates per capita for all police reported crashes remained constant after age 60; in 1990 and 1995, however, involvement rates were higher for drivers aged 70 and older. Between 1983 and 1995, fatal crash involvement rates for drivers aged 70 and older increased 34%; in comparison, fatal crash involvement rates for drivers aged 16–69 declined 4% during the same period.

Per licensed driver, involvement rates for all police reported crashes and for fatal crashes remained relatively constant over time, except among teenage drivers, whose fatal involvement rates increased between 1983 and the 1990s (fig 2). Driver involvement rates for all crashes were highest among the youngest drivers, gradually decreasing, and then stabilizing by age 55 (fig 2, table 1). Driver involvement rates for fatal crashes had a similar pattern until leveling off by age 55 and then increasing at ages 70 and older.

Per VMT, driver involvement rates for all police reported crashes also remained constant between 1990 and 1995 (fig 3). The highest involvement rates continued to be among the youngest drivers, leveling off around age 30 (fig 3, table 1). At about age 65, involvement rates started to increase, rising substantially after age 70. Driver involvement rates for fatal crashes followed a similar pattern to involvement rates for all crashes—rates were very high among teenagers but rose more precipitously than rates for all crashes after age 70. Fatal crash involvement rates for drivers aged 75 and older were nearly as high as those for drivers aged 16–19.

Trends in fatal crash involvement rates per VMT for older and younger drivers have been encouraging. Unlike involve-

In all age groups, between 1999 and 2030, there will be an estimated 39% increase in the number of drivers involved in fatal crashes and a 34% increase in the number involved in police reported crashes. In contrast, it is estimated that there will be a 155% increase in the number of older drivers (aged 65 and older) involved in fatal crashes between 1999 and 2030 and that they will account for 54% of the total projected increase in fatal crash involvements. The number of drivers aged 65 and older involved in all police reported crashes is expected to increase 178%, thus accounting for 41% of the total increase. Even in 2030, however, drivers aged 65 and older are expected to account for 41% of the total increase.
Older drivers are growing in numbers at a greater rate than other age groups, keeping their licenses longer, and driving more miles per license holder. These trends are expected to continue. Thus, older drivers will become an increasing proportion of the overall motor vehicle crash problem, although this trend will not begin to accelerate until after 2010. Even in 2030, however, older drivers would be driving approximately 12,000 miles a year by 2030. These estimates appear high given that driving currently decreases by nearly 50% after age 64. The present study used licensure based rates because rates per licensed driver have remained relatively steady during the past decade or more despite increases in mileage during this time.

The total number of fatal crashes also could rise because of the increasing proportion of older drivers, who have higher death rates per crash than younger drivers. Health improvements might make future older populations less frail than the current older population; however, this benefit might be counterbalanced by the resulting increases in licensure and miles driven.

The number of crash involvements and fatal crash involvements among drivers of all ages could be fewer than projected because of improvements in belt use rates, vehicle crashworthiness, roadway design, and other driving conditions in addition to reductions in alcohol impaired driving. For example, if traffic becomes more congested, travel speeds could slow, which would reduce the number of fatal crashes. During the past 30 years, the number of traffic deaths has decreased or remained the same in spite of increasing vehicle travel, but we do not know if these improvements in death rates per mile will continue.

Age cohort effects also could reduce the expected impact of increased older drivers on the road. Li et al demonstrated that more recent birth cohorts have lower crash fatality risk at the same age than older birth cohorts, attributing this finding to a complex aggregation of environmental and behavioral factors.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR PREVENTION**

Because older vehicle occupants will comprise a large proportion of future deaths in motor vehicle crashes, public health efforts to reduce their morbidity and mortality should be pursued. Research suggests that addressing older drivers’ fragility should receive greater emphasis from sponsors of motor vehicle safety research because fragility is the over-riding factor in the increased involvements of older drivers in fatal crashes. Older drivers are more likely than younger drivers to die when involved in crashes because of increased vulnerability to injury from physical impacts, which starts manifesting itself at ages 60–64. In particular, chest injuries and fractures occur much more frequently among older vehicle occupants.

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**Table 2** Total projections for drivers involved in fatal and all police reported crashes, licensed drivers, and population aged 16+ (driving age)*: 2010, 2020, 2030

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Aged 16-64</th>
<th>Aged 65+</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>% Aged 65+</th>
<th>Involvements</th>
<th>Licensed drivers</th>
<th>Driving age population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Police reported crash involvements</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>38880</td>
<td>6108</td>
<td>44988</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>44321</td>
<td>7721</td>
<td>52042</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>45478</td>
<td>11345</td>
<td>56823</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2030</td>
<td>47023</td>
<td>15568</td>
<td>62591</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td>Same as above</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*US Census Bureau, medium projections.
Further research is needed on vehicle modifications to prevent injuries and deaths due to frailty. Improvements in vehicle crashworthiness and restraints, such as tailoring airbag deployments to the characteristics of individual vehicle occupants, should provide better protection to the fragile bodies of older vehicle occupants involved in crashes. Seat belt designs that distribute restraining forces over a wider area currently are being researched, including belts that would be wider, inflatable, provide slower deceleration, or have four points of attachment to the vehicle.\textsuperscript{24–26}

Making vehicles easier to drive with larger displays and other enhancements to visibility might reduce the cognitive burden associated with driving and should help some older drivers. A high proportion of multiple vehicle fatal crashes involving older drivers occur at intersections.\textsuperscript{27} Better road and traffic engineering, such as protected left turn lanes and left turn signals at intersections, should reduce the crash involvement rates for drivers of all ages at intersections.\textsuperscript{28}

One possible countermeasure may be to have stricter requirements for license renewal once a certain age has been reached. However, age alone is not a good predictor of crash risk. Research is under way to develop screening tests for older drivers, but no test has been identified that can reliably identify at-risk drivers.\textsuperscript{29} Screening for serious impairments may be feasible. However, it is unlikely that a screening test for driving ability could be developed that would not result in restricting many motorists who could safely continue to drive. Furthermore, any driving restrictions will have limited effects on the problem of older occupant fragility. Thus, efforts to restrict driving in older populations need to be carefully balanced against any decrease in elderly mobility and increased emphasis should be placed on methods of protecting older drivers and passengers when they travel in vehicles.

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