

U.S.A. No Longer Leads

John W. Palmer, Editor

As the table nearby clearly shows the United States has dropped from second to 9th in rank based on the death rate per 100 million miles traveled since 1995. The USA may drop to tenth or might even drop out of the top ten in traffic safety as measured by deaths per 100 Million miles traveled.

What might account for the USA's decline in ranking? Three factors are highly associated with death on our highways (Table 2) and the largest single factor associated with death on our highways is failure to use safety belts. The worldwide leader in safety belt use is Australia with over 95% of drivers using safety belts. The USA lags far behind at about 80% safety belt usage. Our usage rate leaves us in 13th place among the top 20 nations. Among English speaking nations Canada, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand all have learned to wear safety belts at a much higher rate than our citizens do. Four of our states have learned the safety belt lesson. California, Hawaii, Oregon, and Washington all have safety belt usage at or above 90%.

What have our Pacific Ocean state's learned that the rest of us have failed to learn? They all have primary safety belt use laws. Have these state done a better job of education the public concerning safety belt usage? With ADTSEA's next two annual conferences being held in the region of our country that has gotten the message on safety belt usage we all have a chance to learn the lesson our sister states in the west have already learned.

The second biggest factor associated with death on our highways is alcohol impaired driving. Thirty two percent of fatally injury drivers test at or above .08 BAC. When you examine Table 1 you will see steady progress in reducing the percent of fatally injured drivers with

BAC's at or above .08 from 1982 until 1994. Since 1994 no decline has occurred. What might account for the end of the decline? Perhaps the generation of drivers who were born after the last major set of changes in law related to alcohol impaired driving were enacted have experienced life in a way that minimizes the dangers of mixing alcohol use with driving.

Table 2

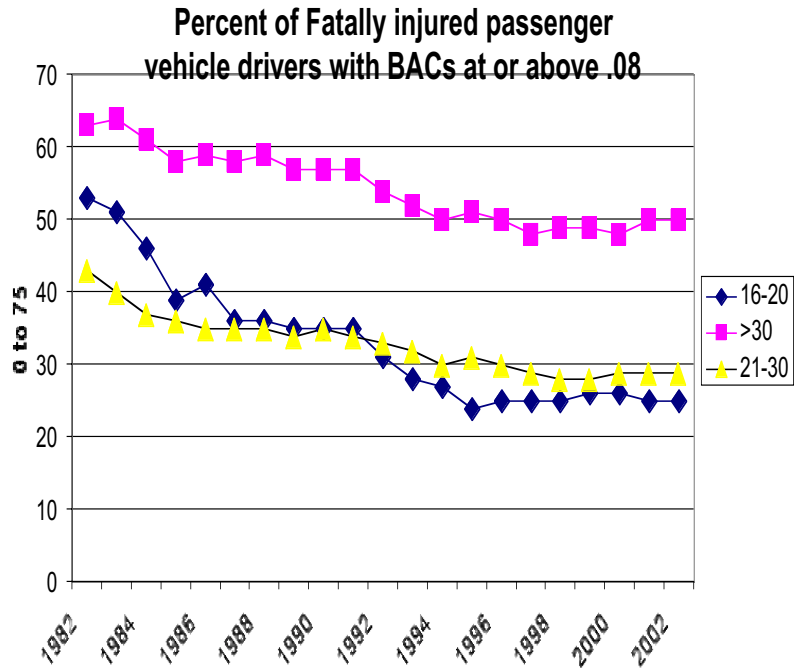
Factor	Percent
Not belted	52
BAC > .08	35
Speeding	31
None of the Above	30

From 1992 to 2002 arrests for alcohol impaired driving hit a low of just under 1.4 million and they averaged about 1.45 million arrests each year. The most arrests in this 10-year period occurred in 1992

Table 3

	2001	1995		
Nation	rate	Rank	Rank	rate dif
Britain	1.21	1	3	2.68 55%
Norway	1.33	2	4	2.79 52%
Sweden	1.34	3	1	2.37 43%
Canada	1.44	4	NA	NA
Australia	1.45	5	7	3.37 57%
Finland	1.46	6	5	2.8 48%
Switz.	1.46	7	6	3.24 43%
Den.	1.48	8	9	4.11 54%
U.S.A.	1.52	9	2	2.47 38%
Germ.	1.81	10	8	3.51 48%

Table 1



when a little over 1.6 million arrests for DUI were made. The highest number of alcohol related fatalities occurred the same year the highest number of arrests were made with nearly 18,500 alcohol related deaths in 1992. Seven years later the number of alcohol related deaths hit a low of just over 16,500. The average number of alcohol related deaths during the 10 years from 1992 to 2002 was about 17,500.

Speeding was a close third factor in 31% of fatal crashes with all other driver behaviors accounting for 30%. If the USA is to avoid further decline in highway safety status compared to other countries we are going to have to find a better way to influence driver behavior. Perhaps it is time to revisit the 3 Es (education, engineering and enforcement)? Improvements in enforcement and engineering require public support and what better place to begin gathering public support than in the driver education classroom? All three of the Es have a role to play and perhaps our nations decline in traffic safety performance is linked to the past 20 years of neglect of education's role in traffic safety.

Just a thought.

