

Sarah Knight

Weiss-Strausberg

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### The Human Element: Fatalities in US Automobile Accidents

On Christmas eve, just outside of the sleepy mountain town of Genesee in Colorado, mother of four Sancy Shaw was driving home with her daughter ("Teacher Killed").

Unfortunately a fellow driver on the road, Cheri Goddard, had made the unfortunate choice to drive while under the influence of alcohol and marijuana, causing her to overcorrect after she drifted to the side of the road and then crossing the highway median striking Sancy's vehicle head-on ("2 Women Killed"). On this Christmas Eve night, tragedy struck in the form of human error - both drivers were killed on impact, and Sancy's daughter was left in critical condition ("2 Women Killed"). Unfortunately for victims like Sancy and her daughter, human error is the primary cause in fatal automobile accidents in the United States.

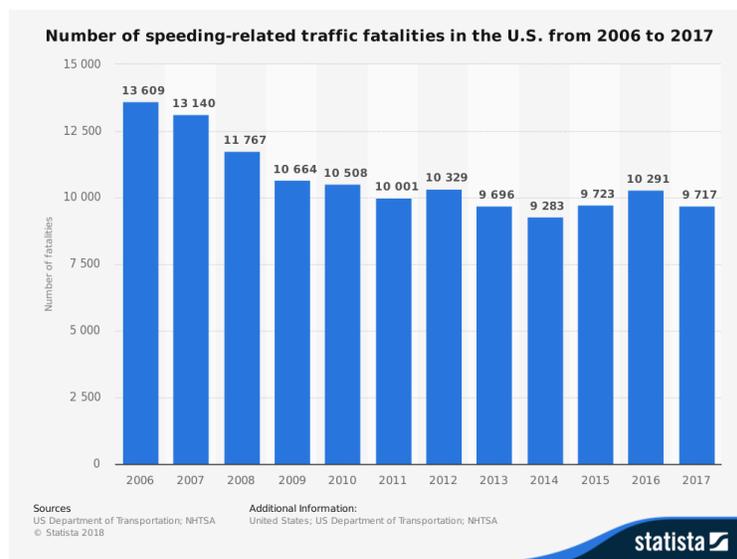
Human error can take many forms. In the state of Colorado, marijuana was a factor in the Shaw accident, alongside a far more common human cause of automobile accidents - alcohol ("Teacher Killed" para.2). While alcohol is the main focus for intoxication in fatal accidents, driving under the influence of other substances is currently a difficult subject to measure - meaning there may be more deaths related to driving while impaired than reported due to just alcohol. According to J.T. Griffin, the Chief Government Affairs Officer for Mothers Against Drunk Driving, in reference to measuring the involvement of marijuana in accidents like the one that killed Sancy Shaw, "Frankly, there may never be a .08 standard because of the way the drug works" (quoted in Thompson para.23). Thus, statistics and reported data tends to focus on drunk driving as it is far easier to prove. The article "It Remains the Leading Cause of

Auto Deaths” in *USA Today* noted that of the 37,133 traffic fatalities in the United States in 2017 10,874 were caused by drunk driving (para.2). This represents almost one third of total traffic fatalities. This number, unfortunately, is not an outlier. According to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) in the years of 2011-2016 legal intoxication was involved in 28-31% of all fatal accidents (“Traffic Safety Facts” 40). Including non-legal levels of intoxication (where alcohol is still present in a driver’s system but not at legal intoxication levels), this rises to 33-35% of all accidents in the same time range (40). Imagine a fully sold out, standing room only game for the Pittsburgh Penguins in PPG Paints Arena - 18,387 people in total (“PPG Paints” para.2) . More people die every 2 years than the capacity of this arena, all due to the human error of drinking and driving.

While drunk driving may be the leading cause of deaths in automobile accidents, a new form of human error is becoming a threat on the road. In her article “Killer Cell Phones and Complacent Companies” published in the *University of Miami Law Review*, author Summer Galitz begins by drawing on the example of Ashley Kubiak (882). According to Galitz, in 2013 Kubiak received a text message on her iPhone, distracting her from the road for a few critical seconds - causing her to rear-end another vehicle while checking her text messages. This accident left two women dead and a seven-year-old cancer survivor a paraplegic. Much like Sancy Shaw, the victims in this accident, Shari Standard and Sandra Jones, lost their lives due to easily preventable human error. The law review notes that in 2015 the total loss of life due to distracted driving was an astonishing 3,477 people (884). “Every day, eleven teenagers die from accidents caused by texting while driving, making texting while driving the leading cause of death among teenagers” says Galitz, “In fact, more teenagers die from crashes caused by texting while driving than from drunk driving accidents” (888). While shocking, the use of cell

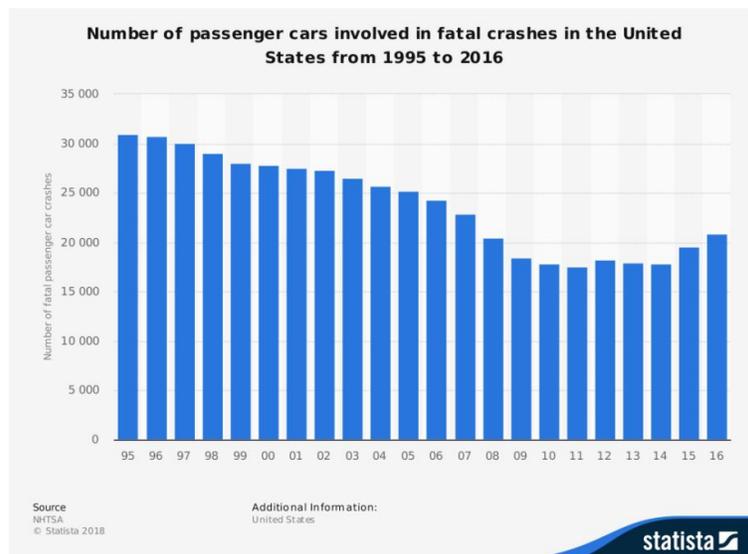
phones (alongside other driving distractions) was reported to be a factor in 6.2% of fatal accidents in 2016 according to the NTSB “Traffic Safety Facts” report (117).

Distracted driving goes hand in hand with the third major cause of vehicular fatalities in the United States, dangerous driving. A moment of distraction at the wheel can be deadly even if the driver is otherwise following all traffic safety guidelines. For a driver already engaged in dangerous driving behaviors, a distraction is not always needed to cause a serious traffic accident. This was the case on May 12th, as Shelly Bradbury of the Pittsburgh Post Gazette reported, when Desiree Nelson lost control of her vehicle, causing a multi vehicle accident (“Mckees Rocks”). At the time of the accident Nelson asserted she had no idea what caused her to lose control of her car, containing herself and her three children, causing it to flip and cause serious damage to the car driven by Michael Markilinski, who was pronounced dead at the scene. According to the article by Bradbury, after investigators discovered Nelson’s SUV computer indicated she was travelling over twice the speed limit for that stretch of road, she was charged with involuntary manslaughter (among other charges) in November (para.7). Speeding related traffic fatalities represented 9,717 deaths according to Statista’s “Number of speeding-related traffic fatalities in the US from 2006-2017” (seen below). This represents 26.1% of the 37,133 traffic fatalities in 2017 (“Traffic Safety Facts” 40). Speeding, unfortunately, only represents a small portion of the human error element that can make driving dangerous.



Drivers can also be driving erratically, not following traffic safety laws other than speeding, and can allow intense emotions to increase their dangerous driving behaviors.

While looking at drunk driving, distracted driving and dangerous driving, it is important to note there are as many ways human error can cause accidents as there are humans on the road. The director of the Emergency Responder Safety Institute, Jack Sullivan, refers to the most dangerous drivers as “D Drivers” - with the “D” standing for “drugged, drunk, drowsy, distracted, disturbed, disgruntled, disrespectful or just plain dangerous” (“D Drivers para.4). These drivers, Sullivan observes, have a “me-first” way of approaching the road. In fact, in an interview on *NPR*, Mark Rosekind of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration observed “Ninety-four percent of crashes can be tied back to a human choice or error” (“Human Errors”). Rosekind further discussed that traffic fatalities are on the rise despite significant advances in safety of vehicle design and features. While the number of passenger cars involved in fatal crashes was on the decline until 2010, the Statista graph below clearly shows that this number has started to rise, much as Rosekind noted (“Number of passenger cars”).



Clearly human error is a large part of what makes driving on the road dangerous and fatal. Whether this error takes the form of drunk driving, distracted driving or dangerous driving, the human element is inexorably intertwined with traffic fatalities. Debbie Hersman of the National Safety Council drove this point home in a chilling statement on NPR, “[m]ore than 100 people die on our highways every day. That's the equivalent of two regional jets, 14 planes each week, crashing and killing everyone on board” (“Human Errors”). With 14 planes worth of people dying on U.S. highways weekly, perhaps it is time to find a way to take the human element out of driving.

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