



FACT SHEET

Module 4.4

Rural Road Safety

In the United States rural roads that are not part of the Interstate Highway System have traditionally accounted for about 50 percent of the total fatalities on our nation's roadways. The fatality rate per 100 million vehicle-miles traveled in rural areas is more than twice the rate in urban areas.

Rural road crashes are generally more severe than crashes on urban roads due to differences in speeds, road geometry, road purpose, enforcement level for rules of the road, and other factors. Another troublesome characteristic of the rural road safety situation in the United States is that 75 percent of the drivers involved in fatal crashes on rural roads are rural and small-town residents. One can surmise that the drivers in these crashes are generally familiar with the roads on which they are driving and driving on these roads becomes routine, unconscious driving behaviors.

Characteristics of Rural Road Safety



Hazards, such as utility posts, trees, and other fixed objects close to the roadway, are common in rural areas.

Rural road crashes fall into three categories: (1) single-vehicle crashes (especially driving off the road), (2) head-on collisions, and (3) collisions at intersections. These three crash types account for as much as 79 percent of rural crashes. Single-vehicle crashes are the most common because all three elements of hazardous factors — driver behavior, the vehicle, and the road — contribute to these crashes and increase their severity. Head-on collisions make up nearly 18 percent of all fatal crashes on rural roads. Driver behavior and the roadways are the principal factors in these crashes. Collisions at intersections account for about 15 percent of all fatal rural road crashes. Again, driver behavior and roadways are the key contributing factors to these types of crashes.

Inappropriate and excessive speeds are important contributing factors in rural road crashes because rural roads generally have inconsistent design characteristics. The roads evolve over time instead of being specifically designed with safety features typically found on urban roads. Speed variation caused by the presence of buses, heavy trucks, agricultural vehicles, motorcyclists, and bicyclists also generates higher crash risks on rural roads than on other types of roads. Aside from this, fatigue and alcohol/drug use are also key factors in rural road safety.

Drivers can reduce their risk by following these simple precautions:

- Reduce speed,
- Search the environment carefully for potential hazards,
- Identify slow moving vehicles early,
- Recognize and be prepared for when domestic and wild animals are more likely to be in and along the roadway,
- Increase following distance, and
- Buckle up.

Information and photo obtained from the U.S. Federal Highway Administration at <http://www.tfhr.gov/pubrds/septoct99/ruralrds>