

Women drivers? They're safer than men

By Joe Kennedy

WASHINGTON - That age-old stereotype about dangerous women drivers is shattered in a big new traffic analysis: Male drivers have a 77 percent higher risk of dying in a car accident than women, based on miles driven.

And the author of the research says he takes it to heart when he travels — his wife takes the wheel.

"I put a mitt in my mouth and ride shotgun," said David Gerard, a [Carnegie Mellon University](#) researcher who co-authored a major new U.S. road risk analysis.

The study holds plenty of surprises.

- The highway death rate is higher for cautious 82-year-old women than for risk-taking 16-year-old boys.
- New England is the safest region for drivers — despite all those stories about crazy Boston drivers.
- The safest passenger is a youngster strapped in a car seat and being driven during morning rush hour.

The findings are from [Traffic STATS](#), a detailed and searchable new risk analysis of road fatality statistics by Carnegie Mellon for the American Automobile Association. Plans are to make the report public next week, but The Associated Press got an early look.

The analysis calculates that overall, about one death occurs for every 100 million passenger miles traveled. And it shows that some long-held assumptions about safety on U.S. highways don't jibe with hard numbers. It lists the risk of road death by age, gender, type of vehicle, time of day and geographic region.

"We are finding comparisons that are surprising all the time," said study co-author Paul Fischbeck, a Carnegie Mellon professor of social and decision sciences. "What is necessary now is to go through and do that second level of analysis to figure out why some of these things are true."

Fragility and fatality

For example, those dangerous 82-year-old women are 60 percent more likely to die on the road than a 16-year-old boy because they are so frail, said Anne McCartt, a research official at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, who was not part of the study.

"It's an issue not of risk-taking behavior, but of fragility," McCartt said. The elderly are more likely to die when they are injured in an accident, she said, an explanation that Gerard and Fischbeck validate.

These elderly women have the nation's highest road death risks even when they're not driving — five times higher than the national average.

Right behind octogenarians in high risk are young male drivers, ages 16-23, with fatality rates four times higher than average.

That can be attributed to "inexperience and immaturity," McCartt said.

Drivers aged 40 and 50 tie for the lowest risk of dying in an accident. But if you're a male out at 2 a.m. Saturday on a motorcycle in the South, you may want to take out some more insurance.

The safest scenario

By combining a batch of data of all types, you can construct the safest possible scenario on the road: That would involve a 4-year-old girl in a van or school bus, stuck in a Wednesday morning rush hour in New England in February.

Of all the ages to be in a car, 4-year-olds have the lowest death risks — probably because they are in child car seats and their parents drive more carefully, Fischbeck said.

“They are really protected, they’re being driven around in times of day when it’s very safe (and often in minivans),” Fischbeck said. “It’s a win-win-win-win situation.”

As for men being more likely to die than women? McCartt and Fischbeck said men take more risks, speed more, drink and drive more.

“They do stupider things,” said Fischbeck, a former military pilot who has twin toddlers and a “totally unsafe” 1974 Volkswagen Thing.

Vans safer than cars

Fischbeck’s study didn’t get into specific car makes, but found larger vans to be the safest with a death rate less than half the national average for cars, and the drivers themselves played a role.

“It’s a combination of they’re safe and the people who drive them are dull,” Fischbeck said.

School buses, massive vehicles driven during normally safe hours, have a death rate that is one-50th that of average passenger vehicles.

But the death rate on motorcycles was nearly 32 times higher than for cars. One of the riskiest combinations in the database are men between ages 21 and 24 who drive motorcycles between midnight and 4 a.m. Their road fatality risk is 45,000 times higher than normal.

The most deadly hour is at 2 a.m., which is often when bars close and many deaths are alcohol-related, Fischbeck said.

The fewest deaths per mile driven are at 8 a.m., mostly because the roads are so clogged with traffic — and teenage drivers are in school, McCartt said.

That explains New England’s No. 1 ranking for lowest death risk on the road, she said.

Heavy traffic “makes it much more difficult for people to speed,” McCartt said.

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