

**Report: Highway deaths at 5-year low
Fatality rate 1.42 deaths per 100 million miles traveled in 2006**

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ST. LOUIS - Traffic deaths in the United States fell to their lowest total in five years in 2006, and the rate of deaths per miles traveled dropped to a record low, a federal safety official said Monday.

Highway crashes killed 42,642 people last year, said Nicole Nason, administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. That compares with the 43,510 who died in 2005, according to the agency's latest figures.

"To me, that is 868 families that didn't get the terrible call that a loved one was killed in a motor vehicle accident," said Nason said, who released the annual findings at the 33rd International Forum on Traffic Records and Highway Safety Systems.

The fatality rate of 1.42 deaths per 100 million miles traveled in 2006 was the lowest rate recorded by the Department of Transportation, she said. More analysis needs to be done to better understand the overall decline in traffic deaths, Nason said, but factors include strong law enforcement and more and better safety features in cars.

State-by-state: A mixed report

Deaths in alcohol-related crashes remained essentially the same as in 2005, Nason said.

The NHTSA report also broke down highway deaths by state. It said Missouri led the list with a 13 percent drop in fatalities, from 1,257 in 2005 to 1,096 in 2006. At the other end of the spectrum, Vermont highway deaths were up 19 percent, to 87 deaths in 2006 compared with 73 in 2005.

Motorcycle deaths increased for the ninth straight year, especially involving older riders, and for the first time exceeded pedestrian deaths, Nason said. The NHTSA figures show 4,810 motorcycle deaths last year, compared with 4,553 in 2005.

Jonathan Adkins, a spokesman for the Governors Highway Safety Association, said his organization was very disappointed about the increased motorcycle fatalities, saying the data showed "no sign that the trend is going to get anything but worse."

States need to implement laws requiring motorcyclists to wear helmets, Adkins said. Currently, only 20 states and the District of Columbia require riders to wear protective helmets.

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