

An Agenda for New Mexico Traffic Safety, 2007-2010

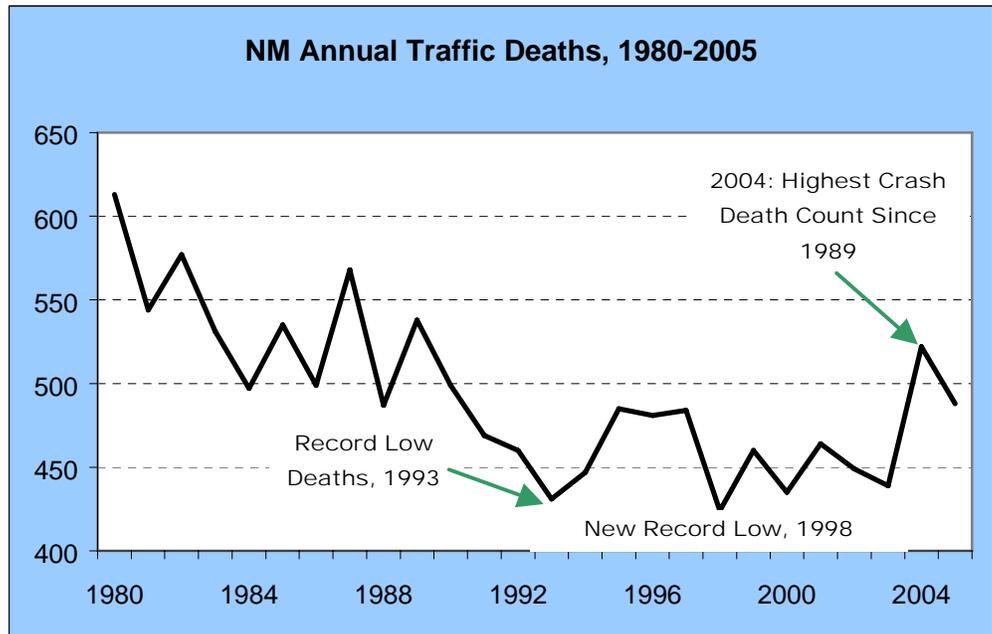
Steven Flint, DWI Resource Center

November, 2006

It's time for progress at reducing New Mexico traffic deaths In 2004, New Mexico crash

deaths reached their highest level since 1989, after two decades of progress had pushed the counts to successive record lows in 1984, 1988, 1993, and 1998. The high levels for 2004 continued, producing for 2005 the second-highest level since 1990, and, for 2006 through October, deaths on par with 2005.¹

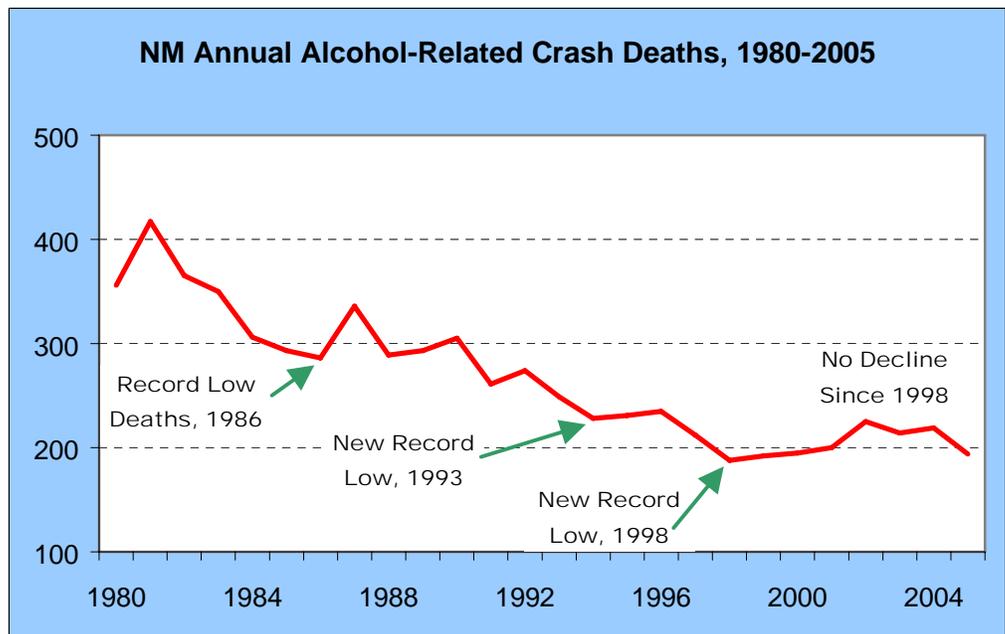
Crash deaths declined from 1980-1998 primarily due to DWI death reductions and increased safety belt usage. The increases since 1998 are principally due to increased rural travel, reduced rural traffic enforcement, lack of further DWI death reductions since 1998, and reduced progress on safety belt usage. Above all, deaths have risen due to choosing official policies that have been ineffective.



What State Leaders should do: Make available more State Police officers for traffic enforcement, make DWI reduction efforts more effective, and make safety belt use promotion methods deliver. Host two major international traffic safety conferences in New Mexico by 2009, to bring the best researchers' ideas directly to New Mexicans.

We must return to progress at reducing New Mexico alcohol-related crash deaths

Steady progress at DWI death reduction produced successive record lows for alcohol-related deaths in 1983, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1991, 1993, 1994, 1997, and 1998, but then no further reductions since 1998.² Governor Richardson is the first Governor since Garrey Carruthers to not produce a record low for alcohol-related deaths.



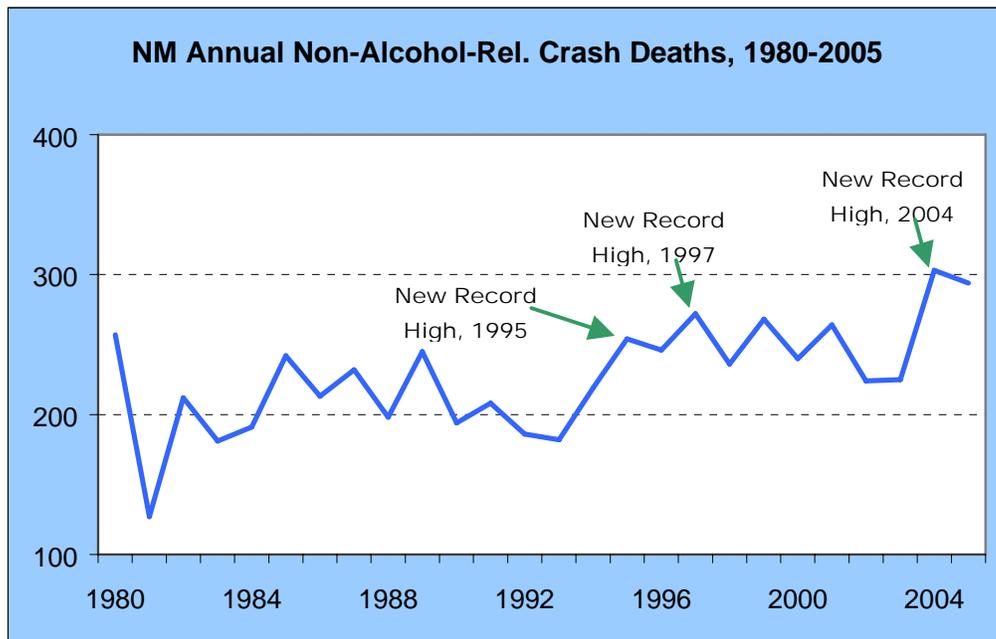
Deaths declined due to increased enforcement in the early 1980's, enacting administrative driver license revocation in 1984, increased safety belt use, community DWI prevention funding, a 0.08 law and launch of *Operation DWI* checkpoints in 1993, and *Operation DWI* expansion in 1996.

Lack of progress against DWI is due to ineffective strategies, not to lack of effort. Ignition interlock laws have received great attention, but 70 percent of drunk drivers in crashes have never been arrested for DWI before³, and 97% of drunk drivers in crashes have no recent prior convictions, so the devices do not reach most of the population that causes crashes. Furthermore, compliance with the law is incomplete. New Mexico DWI arrest counts have declined 25% from 1993 to 2005⁴ due to police funding, recruiting, and retention issues, reducing deterrent effects. State enforcement blitzes have confusingly mixed together messages about DWI with others about safety belts and speeding, to the detriment of all three areas of effort, so publicity for checkpoints has not conveyed an increasing sense of risk of arrest to drunk drivers in recent years.

What State Leaders should do: Increase DWI enforcement efforts for each type of police agency to their peak prior level, returning the State to prior conditions of vigorous deterrence that produced progress. Re-energize special efforts for rural DWI prevention, where 80% of DWI deaths happen. Separate DWI prevention publicity from other types, and use aggressive, innovative means to make especially sure that it reaches the young males of every ethnic group most likely to drive while impaired. Refocus State and local DWI funding toward efforts that produce bottom-line injury reductions. Adopt innovative methods to increase safety belt usage at night. Evaluate plans and results of every agency according to their contribution toward bottom-line injury reductions. New information about court and prosecutor system performance should be drawn from the data resources the State's heavy investments in court automation should be delivering.

New Mexico must reduce record high non-alcohol crash deaths

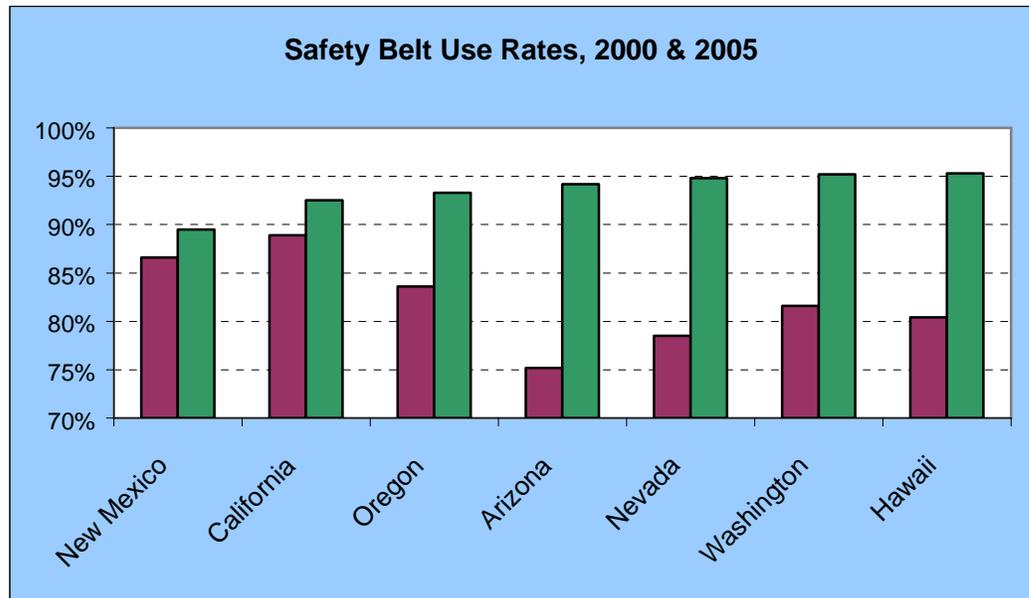
With rural speed limit increases in 1995, non-alcohol-related crash deaths in New Mexico soared to their highest levels since good record-keeping started in 1980. There have been more than 400 extra persons killed since 1995 compared to historical levels in this category. Over 150 of those excess deaths are from the extraordinary spike in 2003-2005.⁵



The rises appear to be related to higher rural speeds and reduced rural traffic enforcement. Safety belt use remains lower in rural areas than in urban ones. EMS and trauma care are less available in many rural high-crash areas. Though non-alcohol-related crash deaths now amount to 60% of New Mexico crash deaths, no studies of these categories of crashes are available.

What State Leaders should do: Order an immediate, comprehensive effort to study these crash deaths is in order, using the best epidemiological methods. Form a Governor's-level initiative to promote police recruitment and retention should be launched, since nearly all police agencies face chronic problems with that and single-agency initiative only compound the problems. Leadership is needed for institutional solutions to improve trauma care statewide and first-responder capabilities in high-crash highways in low-population zones (such as I-40 in Guadalupe County, I-10 near Deming, I-25 near La Ciénega, and Navajo arterials). Special efforts for rural safety belt use promotion should be launched.

New Mexico must increase safety belt use progress Safety belt usage soared in the early 1990's, and has changed little since then⁶. By 1995 New Mexico had the second highest usage in the nation, at 86%, yet since then many other states have surpassed us. Despite big increases in safety belt promotion funds, New Mexico's usage has stagnated. As the graphic shows, usage has increased much more in the past five years in other western states than here. Our neighbor Arizona, for example, has reduced the number of

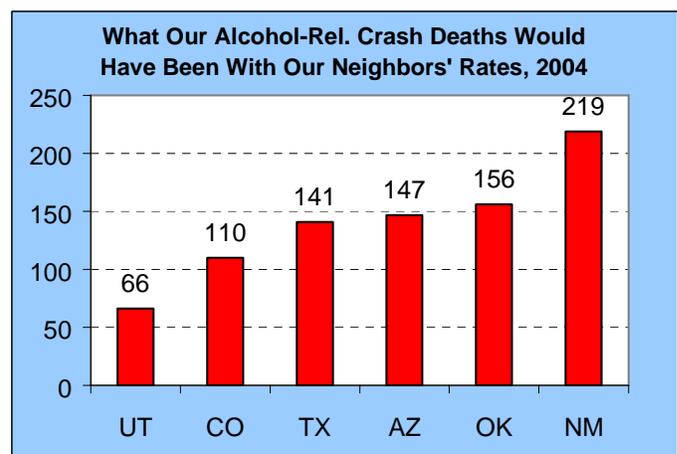


nonusers by 77% in five years, while New Mexico converted only 22% of non-users. This is a critical factor in our high death rates, since the 11% that don't use belts here account for 53% of occupant crash deaths⁷. Our neighbor states have shown that 95% usage is achievable. We can't afford not to get there.

Reasons for the problems: safety belt enforcement here in recent years is especially targeted in urban areas, while deaths are predominately rural. Safety belt use promotion methods have not successfully targeted highest-risk groups that use belts least, such as rural drivers, younger drivers, night-time drivers, and alcohol-impaired drivers. Publicity for the State's *Click It or Ticket* program gets submerged in broader campaign messages about DWI and speed, diluting the message. Despite increased funding, enforcement appears to be below the levels of the early 1990's when progress was dramatic.

What State Leaders should do: Publicity about vigorous safety belt enforcement in blitzes should be separated from other campaigns and meticulously targeted to highest-risk groups, using innovative communications methods. More tribal participation in those efforts is needed. Innovative methods for teen belt use promotion that Safer New Mexico Now developed should be widely applied, as should NHTSA-developed methods for night-time belt use promotion. Agencies should return to vigorous, high-visibility enforcement efforts, well-supported by the Governor, community leaders, and the Judiciary.

We Must Get Focused On Crash Victims State traffic safety planning has largely lost focus on its proper mission: to apply the world's best injury prevention methods to New Mexico's devastating injury problems. Plans are not well-based on injury prevention research. Injury data does not drive funding decisions, and data sources have deteriorated. The State does not follow national models for advanced injury surveillance, a cause with few champions in the agencies. State initiatives like Graduated Licensing, Community DWI Prevention, DWI Courts, Ignition Interlocks, DWI Screening, DWI Schools, and Child Booster Seats are not subjected to injury-focused analyses and formal evaluations. State Goals under the *Accountability in Government Act* and the State's *Highway Safety Improvement*



Plan are not set based on what injury prevention research says is possible from best practices.

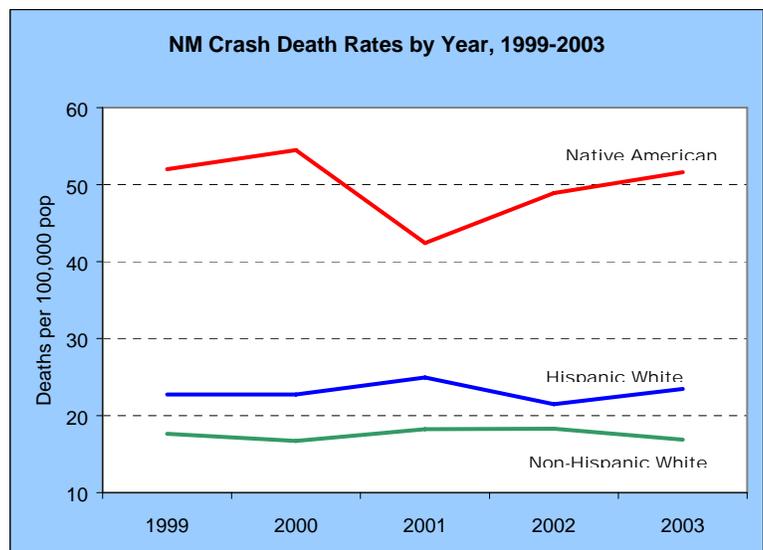
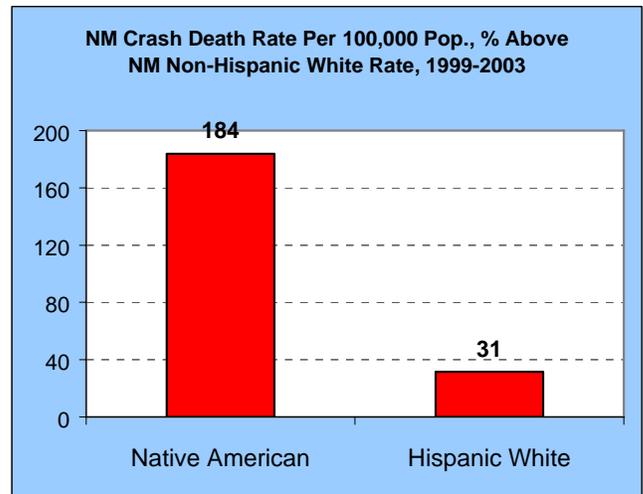
What State Leaders should do: The Governor should set ambitious goals to reduce New Mexico alcohol-related and total crash deaths to below neighbors' levels⁸. He should order reviews of the State's *Highway Safety Improvement Plan* and *Transportation Improvement Plan* to consider bottom-line injury prevention effects of each project when funding decisions are made, ensuring those projects move New Mexico toward those goals at maximum speed. State DWI-prevention projects administered by DOT, DFA, and DOH should be reviewed for potential injury prevention outcomes, encouraging decisions for maximum injury reduction. He should require from his agencies a comprehensive plan to lower New Mexico's death counts to Arizona's level by 2008. Require agencies to focus on death counts rather than rates, to ensure the absolute progress that characterized past achievements. Order systematic evaluations of every major traffic safety initiative in place, to consider and improve performance and impact. Order DOT and DOH to re-launch, jointly, an aggressive initiative for comprehensive crash injury surveillance following the best USDOT models, so that good planning based on good data can also embrace non-fatal injuries and disabilities, particularly the largely forgotten issues around traumatic brain injury. Based on those results, order a revival of comprehensive, ambitious planning for improving the statewide trauma care system.

Reduce Trauma Deaths Among the Most-Victimized Populations A neglected, tragic

truth about motor vehicle trauma in New Mexico is its extraordinary racial bias: Native Americans in 2003 were 11% of the population and 23% of the crash deaths⁹. Their 1999-2003 death rate in New Mexico, per 100,000 population, was 184% higher than the rate for New Mexico Non-Hispanic Whites. The death rate for NM Hispanic Whites for 1999-2003 was 31% higher than the rate for Non-Hispanic Whites. Worse still, the disproportionate killing of Native Americans and Hispanics in New Mexico is not improving over time. The discrepancies are even worse if impacts on Native American and Hispanic males are considered, and especially for young males. New Mexico's traffic safety failures in recent years therefore have especially extreme effects for these groups.

Reasons for these discrepancies are long-standing and partly structural: these groups are disproportionately young compared to other groups; they are more represented in rural areas where prevention efforts are weak and travel speeds are high and therefore of high-energy; trauma care is less accessible in those regions; language and cultural differences isolate them from State and community efforts; jurisdiction barriers obstruct access and funding for prevention; epidemiological data is lacking even to systematically identify the extents of their victimization in traumatic death and injury. Some causes are simple neglect: State plans do not systematically focus on racial variation in death rates, many programs do not explicitly reach out to these groups, and few mid-level state officials have an appreciation and understanding of the problems.

What State Leaders should do: Set ambitious goals for reducing racial variation in crash trauma, and order tracking to monitor that. Order his agencies to obtain and use in planning the augmented "FARS" crash death data that USDOT makes available to some other States, in particular its race and ethnicity data. Order that State planning in DOT and DOH consider outreach to these groups as an explicit review matter in every proposed injury prevention



effort. Order that separate sections of State Plans indicate specific strategies and tactics for achieving ambitious progress. Revive and invigorate past cooperative initiatives on Border Traffic Safety with the State of Texas and the Governments of Mexico and Chihuahua, regarding southern New Mexico issues, and with the Navajo Nation and the State of Arizona regarding northwestern New Mexico issues.

The Best News: Except for funding to meet the urgent need for many more State Police officers, all of this can be carried out within the generous levels of existing funding, by rearranging funding toward projects that most reduce death and injury.

References

¹ Source: *New Mexico Traffic Crash Data*, Division of Government Research, University of New Mexico: 1980-2005.

² Source: *New Mexico Traffic Crash Data*, Division of Government Research, University of New Mexico: 1980-2005.

³ Source: *Problems with Mandating Ignition Interlocks for New Mexico*, DWI Resource Center, February, 2001.

⁴ Source: NM Motor Vehicle Division DWI Citation Tracking Database, as reprocessed by the Division of Government Research, University of New Mexico, July, 2006.

⁵ Source: Death counts are from *New Mexico Traffic Crash Data*, Division of Government Research, University of New Mexico: 1980-2005.

⁶ Source: *Traffic Safety Facts Research Note*, "Safety Belt Use in 2005 - Use Rates in the States and Territories", National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, US Department of Transportation: November, 2005.

⁷ Source: *New Mexico Traffic Fatality Analysis Report 2005*, Division of Government Research, University of New Mexico, <http://www.unm.edu/~dgrint/fars/summ05.html>, November, 2006.

⁸ Source for state death counts: *Traffic Safety Facts 2004 Data: Alcohol*, DOT HS 809 905, National Center for Statistics and Analysis, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, US Department of Transportation, undated.

⁹ Source: *WISQARS Injury Mortality Reports, 1999 - 2003*, National Center for Injury Prevention & Control, US Centers for Disease Control, http://webappa.cdc.gov/sasweb/ncipc/mortrate10_sy.html, November, 2006.