

New Mexico DWI Trends for 2013: Frequently Asked Questions

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- Is DWI still a problem?
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What is the trend in New Mexico DWI deaths?

New Mexico's death toll in alcohol-related motor vehicle crashes fell to 134 in 2013, a record low and 13% below the 2012 level, according to NM Department of Transportation figures. This is less than the previous low value of 143 in 2008, and comes after a decade of dramatic drops in our state's alcohol-related motor vehicle crash deaths.

Successive governors have scrambled to attribute the reductions to their own DWI prevention programs, but the evidence is against claims that recent state anti-DWI efforts had much role in this. There was an even greater decline in crash deaths that did not involve alcohol, which fell 18% for 2013, to their lowest value in 20 years.

Does that mean that New Mexico's DWI prevention programs are working?

There are many factors that reduce deaths in crashes of all kinds, whether or not they involve DWI. When the economy suffers, people drive less, facing less risk. They drive on higher-speed rural highways less, facing less risk of high-speed crashes. They do recreational driving less, lowering risks. Vehicles nowadays are designed to collapse more safely in crashes, and airbags reduce injury in collisions, lowering death risk. Highways have better designs, to reduce likelihood of crashes and the severity of crashes when they do occur. Safety belt usage is high, reducing risk of death and severe injury.

Programs to reduce drunk driving can reduce DWI crashes even more. The good news is that national and international research shows some very specific strategies that can dramatically change the behavior of many of the high-risk drivers most likely to consider drinking and driving. The bad news is that, recently, New Mexico is not using those strategies well. If New Mexico's anti-DWI strategies were working, alcohol-related crash deaths would decline more than other types, and the percentage alcohol-related would drop accordingly. Has it dropped? Yes... early in the last decade, but not since.

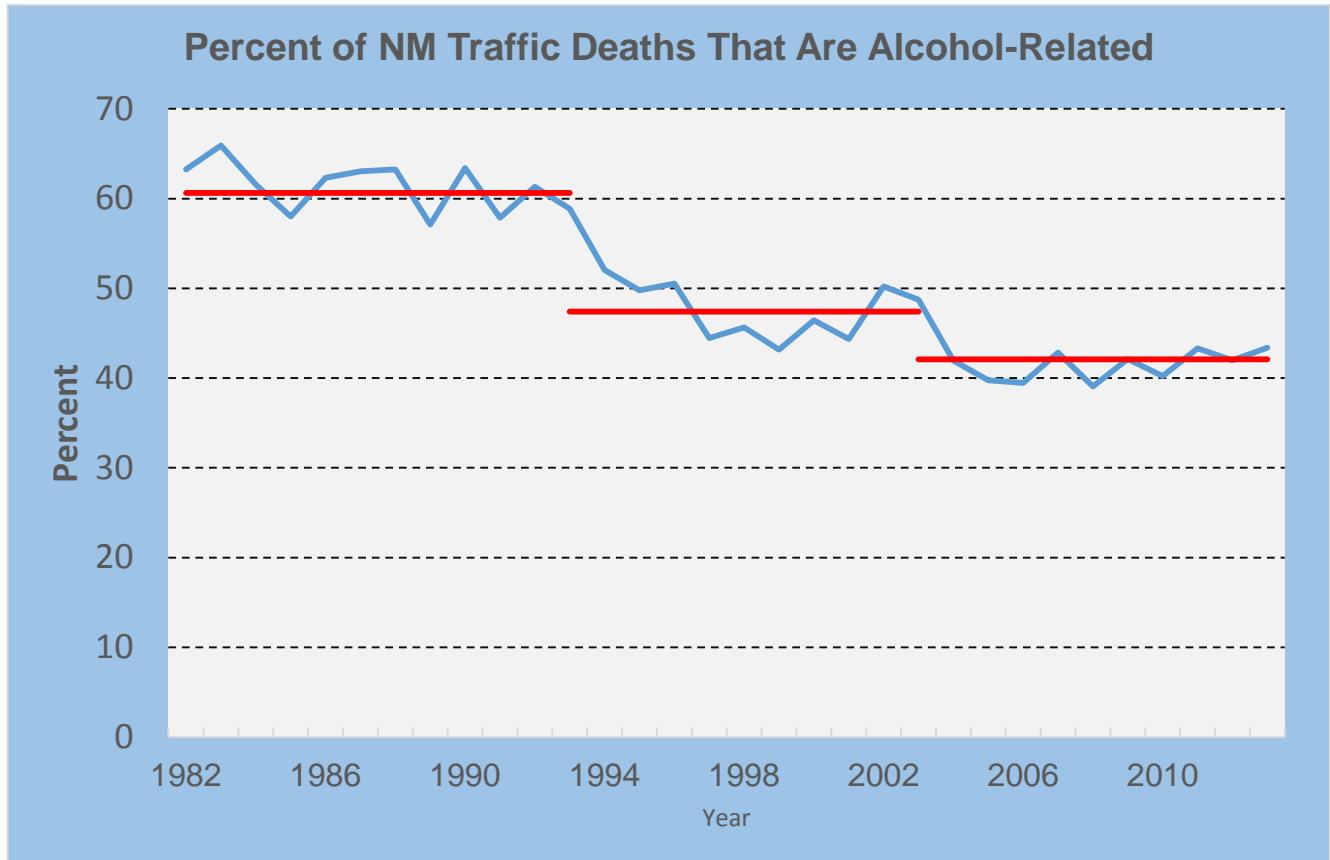


Figure 1: Percent of NM Traffic Deaths that are Alcohol-Related, 1982-2013 – source: NM Dept of Transportation

Is DWI still a problem?

Yes. For 2013, 43% of New Mexico crash deaths were alcohol-related. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for New Mexicans under age 45, they are the leading cause of traumatic brain injury, and they are a major cause of spinal injury and disabilities. The UNM Division of Government Research estimates that alcohol-related crashes had an economic impact of \$279 million for 2011.

National studies suggest that about 10% of the driving population sometimes drives drunk, which implies that 10 percent of drivers cause 43% of crash deaths. By targeting the behavior of a small portion of the population, big reductions can be achieved. What makes DWI a problem that merits particular attention is that DWI crashes are fully preventable, changing a few drivers' behavior wins big results, there is research to say what efforts can change those drivers' behavior, and there is fairly good data to allow evaluating those efforts and refining them until they succeed. In New Mexico we are not doing those things well, which makes improving this a great opportunity to save lives.

What is the trend in New Mexico DWI crash injuries?

No one can say with any confidence, since state record-keeping on non-fatal crashes and their alcohol involvement status has been erratic since 1999, with many crash reports lost or mis-recorded, to varying degrees from year to year. Efforts to track alcohol-related crash disabilities, brain injuries, or spinal injuries also are not available, with no initiatives to remedy this. Prior to 1999, alcohol-related injuries tended to track fairly closely with trends in alcohol-related fatal crashes.

Can New Mexico do better at reducing DWI?

We should not expect New Mexico's current statewide anti-DWI strategies to succeed, since they are untargeted and weak. DWI patrols have dropped, producing the lowest DWI arrest counts in 25 years even as the population has climbed. New Mexico State Police DWI arrests have dropped by over 50% in three years, yet the rural areas that State Police patrol are the scenes of the vast majority of our DWI deaths. Strong and highly visible enforcement can dramatically reduce crash deaths; for example, New South Wales in Australia achieved a 25% drop in DWI death and injury sustained across years with their strong programs. New Mexico needs to do the same.

Although most drunk driving trips don't result in arrests, for those hardest-core drunk drivers who do get arrested there are some strategies that can help stop them from doing that again. New Mexico does poorly at those strategies, too. State studies show very poor court compliance with the statutory mandate that every drunk driver receive alcoholism screening and appropriate treatment. After conviction, offenders often don't comply with sentences, since we lack the intensive DWI probation strategies that reduce recidivism. Ignition interlock programs have poor compliance, poor oversight, and no evaluation. Chronic offenders often don't receive even the moderate sentences the law mandates. There is very little state tracking, oversight, or evaluation of the criminal justice system's actions re DWI.

What should be done to reduce NM DWI deaths and injuries further?

Can New Mexico do better? We must. Our death rate per capita for DWI for 2011 is one third higher than Colorado's and Arizona's, meaning we had 49 more deaths that year compared to what we would have had if we matched Colorado's rate. In the mid-1990's New Mexico had one of the highest safety belt use rates in the nation, but since that time we have had little progress while the other high-rate states' rates soared. If we at least matched those states' safety belt use rates, we would save ten more lives from DWI each year. Funds to achieve these goals are already available in the state traffic safety budgets, just by re-targeting their use toward efforts that directly reduce death and injury.

New Mexico's next governor can save 200 lives from DWI in four years by improving efforts along these lines. New Mexico citizens deserve nothing less, and we must demand that our governor deliver. It will mean the world to those 200 people.

If we achieve that goal, whose lives will be saved?

It is reasonable to presume those saved would match the characteristics of those who died in New Mexico DWI crashes in recent years. Based on 2011-2013 death data from NMDOT:

- *Children's lives saved:* **14**
- *Adults 20-39 saved:* **95**
- *Adults 40-59 saved:* **72**
- *Adults 60 & over saved:* **18**

From CDC data, an estimated 85 of those 200 saved would be Hispanic, 75 would be Non-Hispanic White, 36 would be Native American, and 3 would be African-American. 139 would be male, 61 would be female.

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