

Roadside Assistance Providers Fatally Struck by Vehicles at the Roadside: Incidence and Characteristics

INTRODUCTION

Roadside assistance providers such as motor vehicle towing personnel, mobile mechanics, and safety service patrollers often work on or alongside highways to help motorists stranded due to vehicle breakdowns or crashes. This places them at risk of being struck by passing vehicles. Research is needed to understand the circumstances of crashes in which roadside assistance providers are struck by passing vehicles, to inform and prioritize efforts to protect them. However, the data sources most commonly used for traffic safety research do not reliably identify crash victims as roadside assistance providers, which has hindered previous research efforts. Thus, this study used data from industry sources to identify roadside assistance providers who were struck and killed by vehicles while working, and then linked them to a national database of fatal crashes, to gain an understanding of the circumstances of these crashes and issue recommendations for efforts to protect roadside assistance providers.

METHODOLOGY

Roadside assistance providers who were struck and killed by vehicles while working on the side of the road were identified using records compiled by two industry groups that memorialize roadside assistance providers who have died. The Emergency Responder Safety Institute has maintained records of all roadside assistance providers as well as law enforcement officers, firefighters, and emergency medical services providers struck and killed by vehicles since 2019. The National Tow List has maintained a list of all roadside assistance providers who died in the line of duty from any cause since 2015. Researchers filtered and merged these records to compile a list of all known roadside assistance providers that were struck and killed by vehicles in the United States since 2015. These records were then matched to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's Fatality Analysis Reporting System, a database of all fatal crashes each year in the United States, using information available in both sets of records such as the date and location of the crash and the age of the victim. Data from 2015 through 2021 (the most recent year of fatal crash data available at the time of the study) were examined. The researchers then analyzed these data to document the characteristics of the crashes in which roadside assistance providers died.

TECHNICAL REPORT:

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ABOUT THE AAA FOUNDATION FOR TRAFFIC SAFETY

Founded in 1947, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety in Washington, D.C., is a nonprofit, publicly supported charitable research and educational organization dedicated to saving lives by preventing traffic crashes and reducing injuries when crashes occur. Funding for this research was provided by voluntary contributions from AAA/CAA and their affiliated motor clubs, individual members, AAA-affiliated insurance companies, and other organizations or sources.

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KEY FINDINGS

The researchers identified 123 roadside assistance providers who were struck and killed by vehicles while working in the United States in years 2015 – 2021. This represented nearly four times as many as were identified using national crash data alone and slightly more than reported in a federal database of occupational fatalities. Examination of these data provided the following insights:

- 89% occurred at locations with speed limits of 55 miles per hour or higher, almost all of which were on Interstates or other limited-access highways.
- 84% occurred in crashes with no indication of precipitation nor slippery road conditions.
- 63% occurred during darkness, of which nearly two-thirds were at locations without lighting.
- 63% occurred in crashes in which the striking vehicle left the road before striking the roadside assistance provider, the provider’s vehicle, or the disabled vehicle.
- The annual number of roadside assistance providers struck and killed by vehicles appears to be increasing significantly faster than the concurrent increasing trend in total traffic fatalities. Trends should be interpreted with caution, however, as it is possible that recent records of roadside assistance provider deaths may be more complete than records from earlier in the study period.

The report issues the following recommendations based on the research findings:

- There is a need to reinforce public awareness of and increase compliance with Slow Down, Move Over laws, which require motorists to move over one lane or slow down when approaching an incident where tow operators, police, firefighters or emergency medical service providers are working at the roadside. There is also a need for research on the most effective approaches to increase compliance.
- Countermeasures are needed to protect roadside assistance providers and first responders from out-of-control vehicles that depart the roadway; research is needed to determine what countermeasures are most effective and practical.
- Training for roadside assistance providers should emphasize avoiding working on the traffic-facing side of the incident scene to the greatest extent possible and should provide strategies for how to do so.
- In cases where countermeasures are inherently site-specific or where deployment must be prioritized, deployment should prioritize protecting roadside assistance providers working on high-speed limited-access highways.
- State police crash report forms should include data fields designed to report whether a crash victim was an incident responder and type of responder when applicable, as called for in the current edition of the Model Minimum Uniform Crash Criteria. States should also consider collecting additional information on crashes in which roadside assistance providers and other emergency response personnel are struck by vehicles, at least in those that result in the injury or death of a responder.