Ohio ranks 7th in fatal crashes involving older drivers, study finds

FILE – Rear lights are visible as vehicles arrive Downtown during the morning commute. [Tom Dodge/Dispatch]

By Beth Burger
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Ohio ranks seventh in the country in fatal crashes involving older drivers, according to a report from a Washington-based research group.

TRIP, a national transportation research group, examined fatal crashes between 2012 and 2016 across the country. The study showed fatal crashes involving older drivers are increasing. That's in part due to the growing number of older Americans, according to the group.

"The rapidly growing ranks of older Americans will far outpace previous generations with their level of mobility and activity. Serving their mobility needs will require a transportation system that includes safer roads, safer vehicles, safer drivers and improved choices," Will Wilkins, executive director of TRIP, said in a released statement.

For the five-year period in Ohio, 22 percent of fatal crashes involved at least one driver 65 or older. That age group makes up 20 percent of licensed drivers in the state, according to the report.

"AAA is concerned by the growing number of injuries and deaths involving older drivers in our state," said Mary Lou Gallimore, traffic safety program manager at AAA Ohio Auto Club, in a statement. Improvements could be made to "keep aging road users safe through education, licensing, alternative transportation, and infrastructure enhancements," she said.

State Highway Patrol spokesman Lt. Robert Sellers said there has been an increase across Ohio of older drivers involved in fatal crashes.

When asked what could lead to more crashes, he said, "I think part of it can be vision. Part of it can be declining abilities. And, in this day and age, you can't rule out distractions, as well," he said.

TRIP is pushing for safer roads and has recommended several improvements, including widening turn lanes, installing more rumble strips and replacing signs with ones that have clearer and larger letters. They also want to promote more education for older drivers. The nonprofit group is supported by businesses, including insurance companies and those involved in highway engineering and construction, according to its report.

Columbus police Sgt. Brooke Wilson, who oversees his department's Accident Investigation Unit, said that Columbus had 65 fatal traffic crashes in 2017. Of those, five crashes, or 7.7 percent, involved drivers who were 65 or older. The average age of those involved was 71.

"It appears Columbus is quite below the rest of Ohio ... with respect to 'percentage of fatalities involving at least one 65+ driver,'" Wilson said, in an email to The Dispatch.

Wilson said while age certainly could be a contributing factor in crashes, he said older adults are also physically more fragile.

"How many elderly people become traffic fatalities because they are physically less able to resist or recover from injuries that may not be fatal for someone who is younger or otherwise less vulnerable?" he said.

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