

# Diplomacy, humor take new NHTSA chief far

## Top priorities: Child safety, car technology and law enforcement

By Jayne O'Donnell  
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Nicole Nason seems more mom-next-door than woman at the top of the nation's highway safety agency.

But bubbly personalities can be misleading. The 36-year-old lawyer and former Republican Capitol Hill aide is an accomplished political strategist who uses good humor and charm where others might snipe. It's won her admirers and a job, since May, heading the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

NHTSA deals with issues ranging from auto-safety regulation to drunken driving to safety belt use. Earlier this month, the agency proposed a regulation that would require stability control on all vehicles by 2012. Stability control, which NHTSA says could save more than 10,000 lives a year, uses brakes and engine power to keep cars from veering out of drivers' control.

Since it was on the hot seat during the Firestone tire recall in 2000, the agency has tried to focus more publicly on behavioral issues such as

seat belt use than on mechanical ones. It hasn't been easy.

NHTSA has yet to find the way to lower the nation's highway death toll, which is at a 15-year high. Consumer advocates say that's because the agency has neglected changes that could be made to cars to make them safer. And Congress, frustrated by NHTSA's pace in adopting safety standards, last year laid out an ambitious rulemaking agenda for the next couple of years.

All of this combines to make the job of NHTSA chief a fine one for someone said to be adept at bringing adversaries together and deflecting the drumbeat of criticism from Capitol Hill.

Deputy Attorney General Paul McNulty, who was Nason's boss on the House Judiciary Committee shortly after she graduated from law school, found her, above all, personable. Better still, says McNulty, so did the Democrats with whom she often had to cobble compromises.

"You just like being around her," says McNulty. "Her mind is very quick, and you can see it in her sense of humor."

Another former boss, ex-Transportation secretary Norman Mineta, says Nason can "connect the



By Todd Plitt, USA TODAY

**Chip off the old block:** National Highway Traffic Safety Administration head Nicole Nason says the law enforcement background of her father, Philip Robilotto, heavily influences her traffic-safety perspective.

dots" and make things happen. "There were many times when she'd pull the rabbit out," Mineta says of the years Nason served as assistant secretary for governmental affairs.

Nason, the youngest NHTSA chief ever, says her priorities include child safety, car technology and law enforcement. Her interest in child safety stems, at least in part, from having daughters ages 2 and 5. Nason, who has appeared at several child-safety events in the last few weeks, tells the story of her 5-year-old declaring one day that she wanted something a friend had. As Nason braced to come up with an appro-

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appropriate response to some frivolous request, her daughter said it was a pink booster seat with cup holders. The two went straight to the store to get one.

Nason says car technology interests her because her generation and those younger are so quick to embrace it. Along with stability control, she's intrigued by technology that could unobtrusively check drivers' blood alcohol levels and prevent cars from starting if they are too high, warnings that go off when cars drift from their lanes and brakes that add pressure in emergency situations.

Her interest in highway safety comes naturally. Nason's father, Philip Robilotto, is a retired police chief of Suffolk County, N.Y. Her brother is an emergency room doctor. Her father emphasized highway safety in no uncertain terms. Nason says she's been pulled over only once in her life — by her father, who stopped her with lights and sirens blaring because he thought she was driving too fast through a residential neighborhood.

"If you wind up with a child on your windshield, it will be something you never forget," she says he told her.

Jim Champagne, chairman of the Governors Highway Safety Association and a former Louisiana state police lieutenant colonel, often finds his group at odds with NHTSA

because he thinks the agency tries to push its safety goals on states. But he considers Nason's family ties a big plus.

"Society very often does not want traffic laws enforced," says Champagne, so "she certainly brings a great insight into the tribulations of police officers."

Champagne hopes Nason will become more engaged in efforts to combat speeding, which accounts for a third of all traffic deaths but doesn't get the federal attention belts and booze do.

General Motors safety chief Bob Lange says Nason, who doesn't have an automotive background, has "shown a real willingness to roll up her sleeves to understand the complexities and other technical aspects that go into making vehicles safer."

Former NHTSA chief and consumer advocate Joan Claybrook, a frequent adversary of Republican administrations, thinks Nason's good humor and political skills may be just what's needed.

"If she is savvy politically, she can get things done, walk these fine lines and get closure without turning her back on one side or the other," says Claybrook.

**Discussion:** Why is Nicole Nason well-suited to her job as head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration? What is the role of the NHTSA? Why have consumer advocates criticized the agency in recent years? What are Nason's priorities? Why is she interested in car technology? How did her dad reinforce the importance of driving safely?

Jim Champagne of the Governors Highway Safety Association says, "Society very often does not want traffic laws enforced." Explain his statement. Which laws, in particular, would people rather not have enforced? What would the consequences be if these laws didn't exist? What are some innovative ways that government and law enforcement can combat speeding?

**Activity:** Statistics help make complex information easily understandable. To state that speeding was a contributing factor in 30% of all fatal crashes in 2005 (which it was) conveys the severity of the problem. However, statistics don't give you an idea of the desperate toll a death or serious injury can have on those it affects — the parents, children and friends of the victim, and the person who caused the crash and her or his family and friends.

Read the NHTSA's traffic safety fact sheet on speeding.\* Then, choose one statistic mentioned in the fact sheet and develop a plausible story about how an individual became part of that statistic. Use the graphic organizer on the following page to help you flesh out the details. Then, write a newspaper article about the person and the speeding-related accident in which she or he was involved.

**\*Note to teachers:** The pdf of the NHTSA's safety sheet on speeding is attached. If you prefer to have students go to the website for the information, the directions are as follows: Go to [www.nhtsa.gov](http://www.nhtsa.gov) and click on "NCSA" in the bar below the banner. Next, select "NCSA Publications, Documentations & Manuals" under "Related Links" in the right-hand bar. Click on "Traffic Safety Fact Sheets" and go to "2005 Speeding Traffic Fact Sheet."

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Period: \_\_\_\_\_

Fact or statistic I chose:

**WHO** (Make your description detailed. Tell about the person's family, accomplishments, talents, likes and dislikes, etc.)

**WHAT** (Describe the incident.)

**WHEN**

**WHERE**

**HOW** (Give the technical details of the incident.)

**WHY** (Who was at fault? What caused that person's actions?)



**ARTICLE**

Lined area for writing the article.

# Traffic Safety Facts

2005 Data

## Speeding

*“The economic cost of speeding-related crashes is estimated to be \$40.4 billion each year.”*

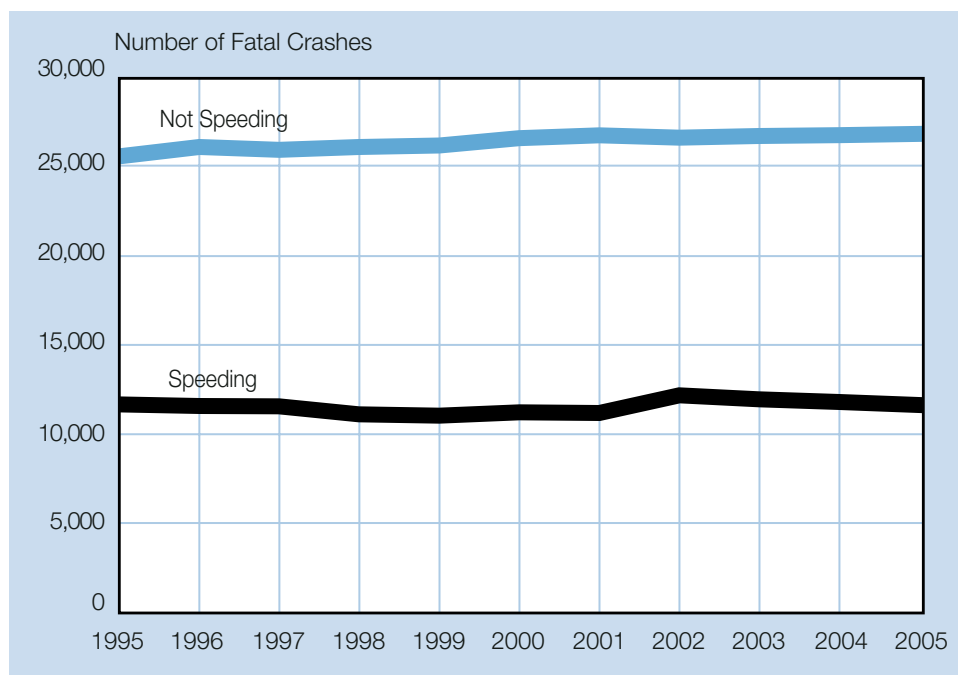
NHTSA considers a crash to be speeding-related if the driver was charged with a speeding-related offense or if an officer indicated that racing, driving too fast for conditions, or exceeding the posted speed limit was a contributing factor in the crash.

Speeding is one of the most prevalent factors contributing to traffic crashes. The economic cost to society of speeding-related crashes is estimated by NHTSA to be \$40.4 billion per year. In 2005, speeding was a contributing factor in 30 percent of all fatal crashes, and 13,113 lives were lost in speeding-related crashes.

Motor vehicle crashes cost society an estimated \$7,300 per second. The total economic cost of crashes was estimated at \$230.6 billion in 2000. In 2000, the cost of speeding-related crashes was estimated to be \$40.4 billion — \$76,865 per minute or \$1,281 per second.

Speeding reduces a driver’s ability to steer safely around curves or objects in the roadway, extends the distance necessary to stop a vehicle, and increases the distance a vehicle travels while the driver reacts to a dangerous situation.

Figure 1  
**Fatal Crashes by Speeding Status, 1995-2005**



For drivers involved in fatal crashes, young males are the most likely to be speeding. The relative proportion of speeding-related crashes to all crashes decreases with increasing driver age. In 2005, 38 percent of the male drivers age 15 to 20 who were involved in fatal crashes were speeding at the time of the crash.

*“In 2005, 38 percent of 15- to 20-year-old male drivers involved in fatal crashes were speeding.”*

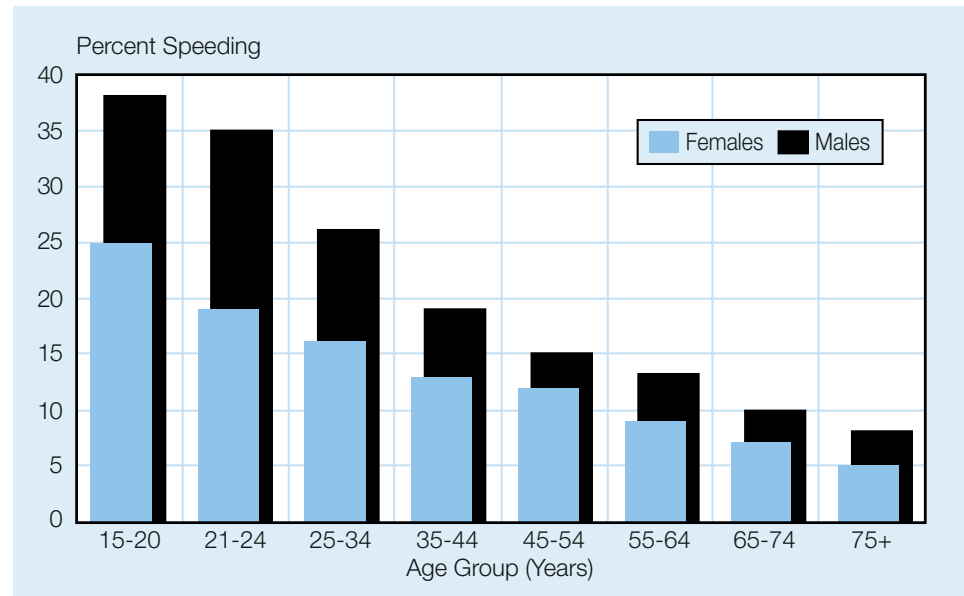


Figure 2

### Speeding Drivers in Fatal Crashes by Age and Sex, 2005

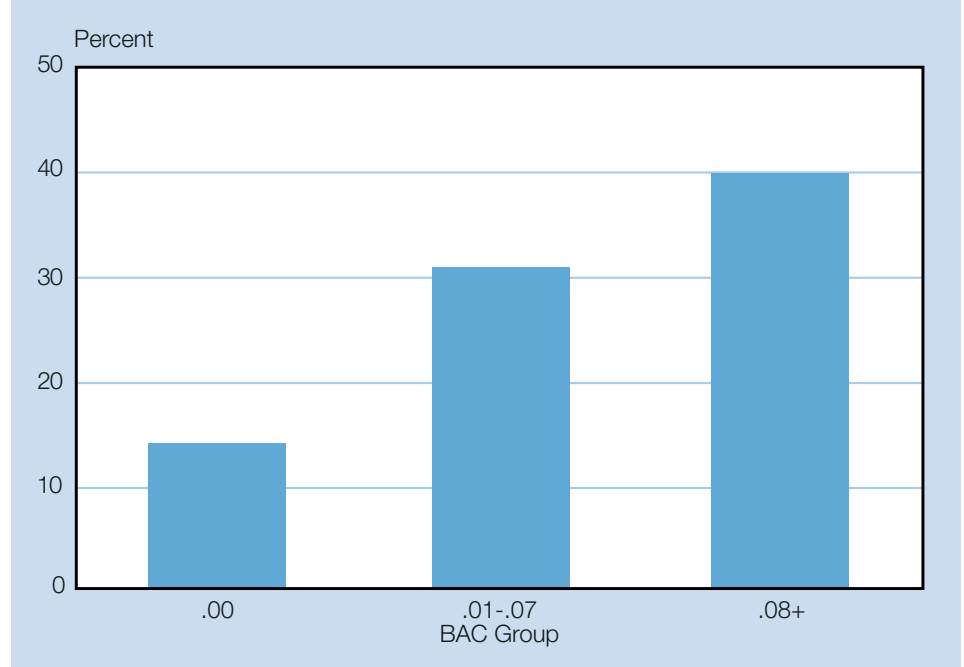
Alcohol and speeding are clearly a deadly combination. Alcohol involvement is prevalent for drivers involved in speeding-related crashes. In 2005, 40 percent of the drivers with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of .08 grams per deciliter (g/dL) or higher involved in fatal crashes were speeding, compared with only 14 percent of the drivers with a BAC of .00 g/dL involved in fatal crashes.

In 2005, 25 percent of the speeding drivers under age 21 who were involved in fatal crashes also had a BAC of .08 g/dL or higher. In contrast, only 11 percent of the nonspeeding drivers under age 21 involved in fatal crashes in 2005 had a BAC of .08 g/dL or higher.

For drivers between the ages of 21 and 24 who were involved in fatal crashes in 2005, 50 percent of speeding drivers had a BAC of .08 g/dL or higher, compared with only 24 percent of nonspeeding drivers.

Figure 3  
**Percentage of All Drivers Involved in Fatal Crashes Who Were Speeding, by BAC Level, 2005**

*“In 2005, 40 percent of the drivers with a BAC of .08 g/dL or higher involved in fatal crashes were speeding, compared with only 14 percent of drivers with a BAC of .00 g/dL involved in fatal crashes.”*



For both speeding and nonspeeding drivers involved in fatal crashes, the percentage of those who had been drinking, with a BAC of .01 g/dL or higher, at the time the crash occurred was higher at night than during the day. Between midnight and 3 a.m., 75 percent of speeding drivers involved in fatal crashes had been drinking.

*“Between midnight and 3 a.m., 75 percent of speeding drivers involved in fatal crashes had been drinking.”*

Figure 4  
**Drivers in Fatal Crashes by Alcohol Involvement, Speeding Status, and Time of Day, 2005**

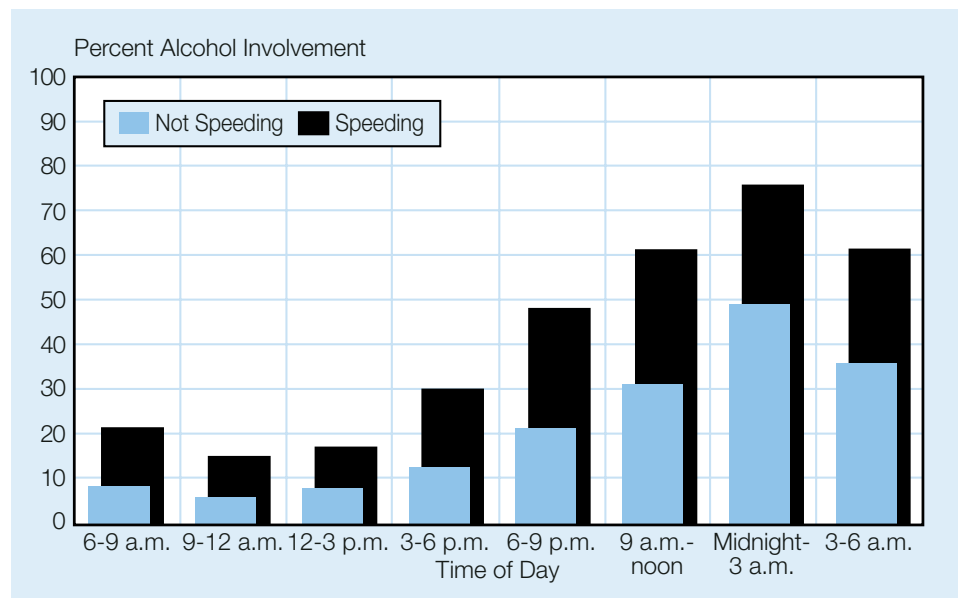
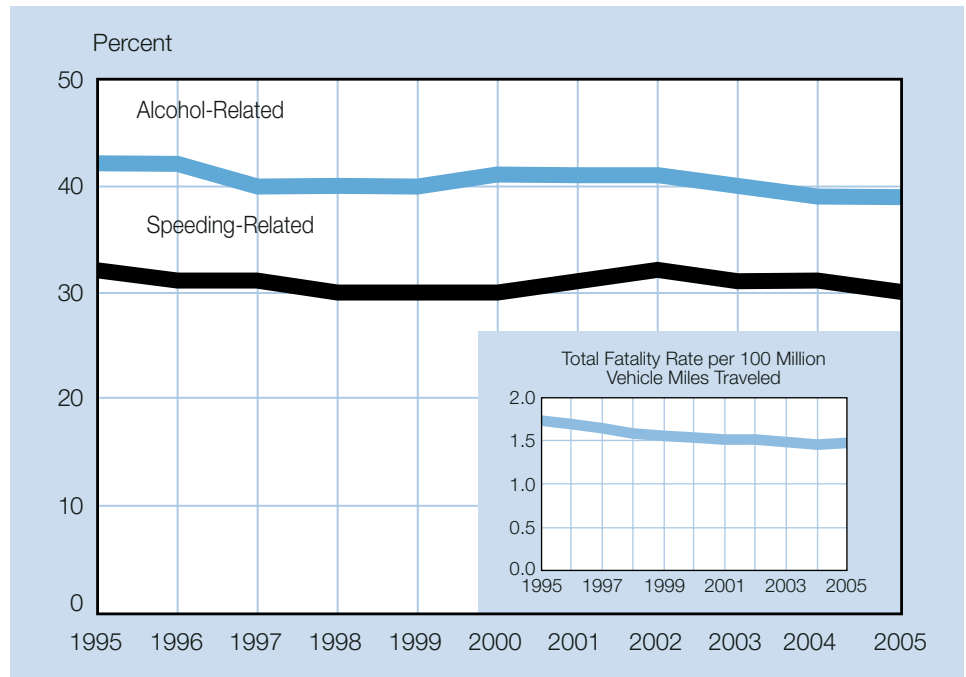


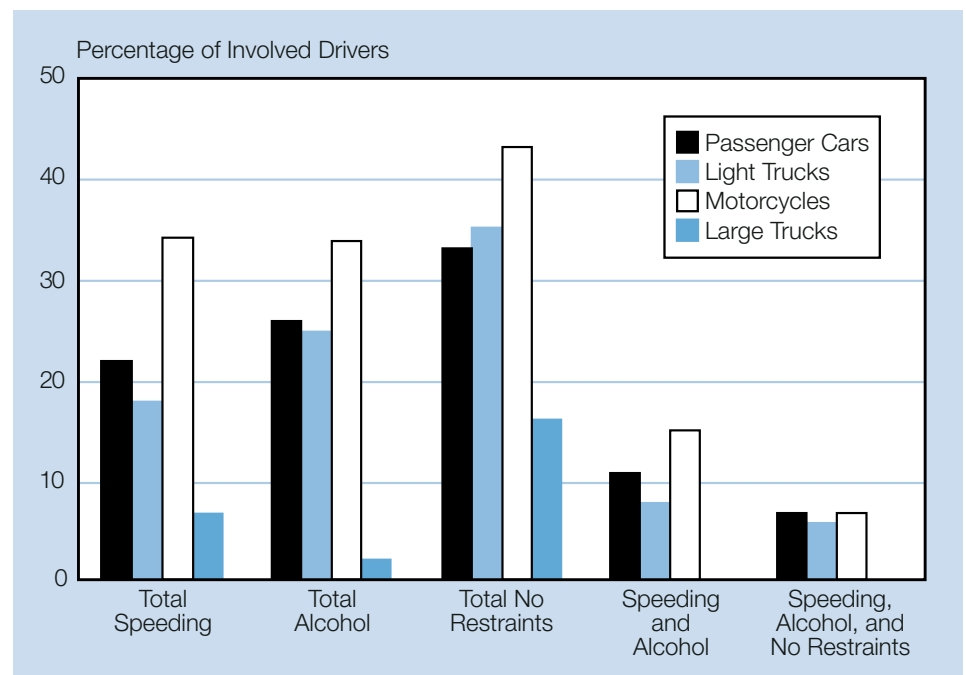
Figure 5  
**Percentages of Fatalities Related to Speeding and to Alcohol, 1995-2005**

*“In fatal crashes, 34 percent of motorcyclists were speeding.”*



In 2005, 34 percent of all motorcyclists involved in fatal crashes were speeding, compared to 22 percent for passenger car drivers, 18 percent for light-truck drivers, and 7 percent for large-truck drivers.

Figure 6  
**Speeding, Alcohol Involvement, and Failure to Use Restraints Among Drivers Involved in Fatal Crashes by Vehicle Type, 2005**



*“Among passenger vehicle drivers age 21 and over in fatal crashes in 2005, those who were not speeding were about 72 percent more likely to be wearing safety belts than those who were speeding at the time of the crash.”*

In 2005, only 49 percent of speeding passenger vehicle drivers under age 21 who were involved in fatal crashes were wearing safety belts at the time of the crash. In contrast, 67 percent of nonspeeding drivers in the same age group were restrained. For drivers age 21 and older, the percentage of speeding drivers involved in fatal crashes who were using restraints at the time of the crash was 43 percent, but 72 percent of nonspeeding drivers in fatal crashes were restrained.

In 2005, 22 percent of speeding drivers involved in fatal crashes had an invalid license at the time of the crash, compared with 11 percent of nonspeeding drivers.

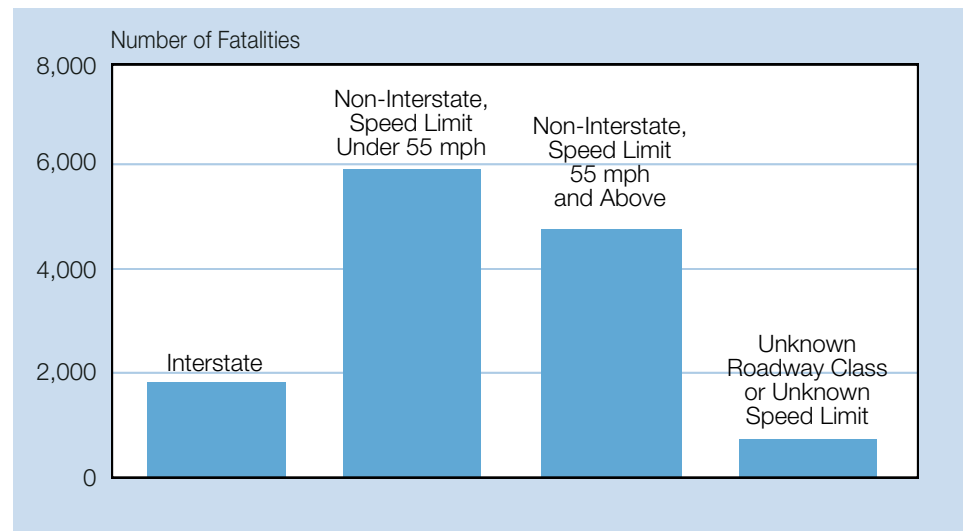
Speeding was a factor in 28 percent of the fatal crashes that occurred on dry roads in 2005 and in 33 percent of those that occurred on wet roads. Speeding was a factor in 51 percent of the fatal crashes that occurred when there was snow or slush on the road and in 58 percent of those that occurred on icy roads.

Speeding was involved in over one-fourth (27%) of the fatal crashes that occurred in construction/maintenance zones in 2005.

In 2005, 86 percent of speeding-related fatalities occurred on roads that were not Interstate highways.

Figure 7

#### Speeding-Related Fatalities by Road Type, 2005



*“Only 14 percent of speeding-related fatalities occur on Interstate highways.”*

#### For more information:

Information on speeding involvement in traffic fatalities is available from the National Center for Statistics and Analysis, NPO-121, 400 Seventh Street SW., Washington, DC 20590. NCSA information can also be obtained by telephone or by fax-on-demand at 800-934-8517. Fax messages should be sent to 202-366-7078. General information on highway traffic safety can be accessed by Internet users [www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/nca](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/nca). To report a safety-related problem or to inquire about motor vehicle safety information, contact the Vehicle Safety Hotline at 888-327-4236.

Other fact sheets available from the National Center for Statistics and Analysis are *Overview, Alcohol, Bicyclists and Other Cyclists* (formerly titled *Pedalcyclists*), *Children, Large Trucks, Motorcycles, Occupant Protection, Older Population, Pedestrians, School Transportation-Related Crashes, State Alcohol Estimates, State Traffic Data, and Young Drivers*. Detailed data on motor vehicle traffic crashes are published annually in *Traffic Safety Facts: A Compilation of Motor Vehicle Crash Data from the Fatality Analysis Reporting System and the General Estimates System*. The fact sheets and annual Traffic Safety Facts report can be accessed online at [www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/nca](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/nca).



Table 1  
**Speeding-Related Traffic Fatalities by Road Type and Speed Limit, 2005**

State	Total Traffic Fatalities	Speeding-Related Fatalities by Road Type and Speed Limit								
		Total	Interstate		Non-Interstate					
			>55 mph	≤55 mph	55 mph	50 mph	45 mph	40 mph	35 mph	<35 mph
Alabama	1,131	493	53	7	118	15	175	31	39	25
Alaska	72	27	7	3	4	0	2	1	5	3
Arizona	1,177	460	109	15	36	23	71	73	32	35
Arkansas	648	104	5	0	52	3	11	7	17	5
California	4,329	1,471	203	30	344	60	145	131	181	156
Colorado	606	204	16	11	25	10	30	24	22	30
Connecticut	274	92	3	7	1	0	9	9	9	49
Delaware	134	52	1	5	4	26	0	5	6	2
Dist of Columbia	48	17	0	5	0	0	0	0	2	10
Florida	3,543	239	14	7	30	11	52	20	33	33
Georgia	1,729	340	22	5	105	6	51	5	43	18
Hawaii	140	69	0	6	6	1	6	1	25	20
Idaho	275	95	14	0	11	11	7	5	8	8
Illinois	1,361	525	68	22	199	16	48	46	62	61
Indiana	938	258	19	17	59	10	42	34	27	46
Iowa	450	44	5	0	19	2	5	0	7	4
Kansas	428	119	16	0	37	2	6	4	4	19
Kentucky	985	187	12	6	117	0	22	2	17	10
Louisiana	955	180	14	3	70	4	34	7	27	13
Maine	169	86	11	3	9	9	21	11	9	10
Maryland	614	214	14	15	19	34	22	29	30	46
Massachusetts	442	146	11	3	4	3	11	21	28	57
Michigan	1,129	243	26	11	120	4	24	2	14	25
Minnesota	559	152	13	4	85	7	6	4	2	20
Mississippi	931	254	36	0	91	20	45	9	21	8
Missouri	1,257	529	59	9	197	6	31	28	66	51
Montana	251	97	17	0	2	2	4	0	9	10
Nebraska	276	51	10	0	5	11	2	3	8	5
Nevada	427	160	24	0	10	8	23	1	23	9
New Hampshire	166	56	4	1	4	5	1	6	14	16
New Jersey	748	79	0	3	10	21	12	3	9	13
New Mexico	488	165	33	2	28	1	12	7	10	11
New York	1,429	456	13	13	173	15	27	37	21	77
North Carolina	1,534	560	40	7	287	4	121	1	72	14
North Dakota	123	28	2	1	8	2	0	1	0	3
Ohio	1,323	277	23	6	123	4	28	7	51	21
Oklahoma	802	292	27	2	64	8	71	13	18	15
Oregon	488	161	10	2	76	3	11	7	19	14
Pennsylvania	1,616	757	44	18	195	18	167	91	144	54
Rhode Island	87	40	6	3	1	3	2	2	6	17
South Carolina	1,093	480	59	2	158	9	93	22	55	24
South Dakota	186	62	7	0	26	0	1	3	4	4
Tennessee	1,270	266	12	10	9	0	9	4	4	4
Texas	3,504	1,426	162	49	174	35	147	117	121	143
Utah	282	75	38	0	3	3	2	6	7	6
Vermont	73	33	2	0	0	13	3	3	5	3
Virginia	947	313	42	19	128	3	52	8	35	19
Washington	647	247	14	4	18	54	12	19	57	41
West Virginia	374	82	10	0	33	3	13	8	6	6
Wisconsin	815	294	16	6	157	2	27	7	18	42
Wyoming	170	56	18	0	8	0	3	1	1	6
<b>U.S. Total*</b>	<b>43,443</b>	<b>13,113</b>	<b>1,384</b>	<b>342</b>	<b>3,462</b>	<b>510</b>	<b>1,719</b>	<b>886</b>	<b>1,453</b>	<b>1,341</b>
Puerto Rico	453	215	45	0	7	3	30	21	84	25

\*Of the total number of speeding-related fatalities in 2005, 5,562 occurred on roads with posted speed limits between 55 and 65 mph, and 902 occurred on roads with speed limits above 65 mph.

Note: The total column for speeding-related fatalities includes fatalities that occurred on roads for which the speed limit was unknown.