

Improving road safety: Lessons from Europe

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Tougher drunk driving laws, lower speed limits and stricter seat belt laws are the best ways to reduce traffic deaths in the United States, say researchers at the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute.

"Despite recent major improvements in [road safety](#) in the U.S., the

current safety level is far below the level of the best-performing countries," said Michael Sivak, research professor at UMTRI.

Sivak and colleague Juha Luoma, an UMTRI visiting research scientist from the VTT Technical Research Centre of Finland, compared the amount and kinds of [fatal crashes](#) in the U.S., United Kingdom, Sweden and the Netherlands.

They found that the number of road deaths has fallen in all four countries since 2006. However, the fatality rate per population is much higher in the U.S.—124 deaths per million people, compared to 43 in the U.K., 42 in Sweden and 40 in the Netherlands.

Sivak and Luoma say that the average annual distance driven per capita in the U.S. is about twice that of the three European countries.

"The U.S. is a much larger country than any of the others," Luoma said. "Furthermore, land use and urban planning differ substantially between the U.S. and Europe. Most U.S. cities were designed in such a way that transportation depends heavily on personal vehicles."

However, the increased amount of driving in the U.S. does not fully account for the differences in road safety, the researchers say. Several methods that have likely contributed to better road safety in the U.K., Sweden and the Netherlands should be adopted in the U.S., as well, they add.

These include:

- Lower [blood alcohol content](#) limits, random breath testing and wider use of alcohol ignition interlocks.
- Lower speed limits (especially in urban areas), special [speed](#)

[limits](#) and compulsory speed limiters for heavy vehicles, and use of [speed cameras](#) and/or intelligent speed adaptation.

- Primary seat belt laws that cover both front and rear occupants and installation of advanced seat-belt reminders.
- A policy focus on reducing overall fatalities, not on reducing the [fatality rate](#) per distance driven.
- New strategies to reduce distances driven by improving urban planning and encouraging more public transportation and telecommuting.

"The implementation of effective new countermeasures in the U.S. requires raising the awareness of the general public and of the decision makers concerning the much higher safety level in the best-performing countries and of the effectiveness of various countermeasures that have been implemented elsewhere," Sivak said. "The countermeasures to be recommended would lead to only limited restrictions on driver behavior or privacy, but would likely result in substantial benefits in terms of human life saved, suffering avoided and expenses reduced."

Provided by University of Michigan

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