

SAFETY ISSUES AND CONCERNS
TRAFFIC ACCIDENTS AND WHY SOCIETY DOESN'T PAY MORE ATTENTION TO
THOSE NUMBERS

BILL SEYMOUR: Welcome to DMV Infocast, a production of the Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles. This is Bill Seymour, Infocast editor. The following is a report from National Public Radio's Neil Conan aired on his show, *Talk of the Nation*, about traffic accidents and why we don't do more to stop them in our society.

NEIL CONAN: Far more Americans die in traffic accidents every year than in terrorist attacks or in war. We talk about why we pay so little attention to those numbers. I'm Neil Conan with *Talk of the Nation* from NPR news.

The numbers are frightening. More than 40,000 Americans died in traffic accidents last year but few people pay very much attention. If that many people were killed in a terrorist attack or in plane crashes, argues Gregg Easterbrook, we'd be in a state of national emergency, and he argues it will likely get worse as more and more drivers gab away on cell phones or drive high-powered cars too fast. So why do we collectively pay so little attention to these numbers and what can we do to solve the problem? Some cities banned cell phones and other distractions in the car. 800-989-8255, the email address, talk@npr.org, and you can comment on our blog. That's at npr.org/blogofthenation. And Gregg Easterbrook is a fellow of the Brookings Institution, author of the book the [Progress Paradox](#). He recently wrote for the *Los Angeles Times* entitled, "Road Kill," and joins us today by phone from his home in Maryland.

NEIL: Nice to have you on the program today.

GREGG EASTERBOOK: Hi, Neil.

NEIL: You wrote that some 245,000 Americans died in traffic accidents since 9/11. Why do you think people don't pay more attention?

GREGG: Well, I think there are a couple of things going on. One is obviously a terrorist attack is a crime and a threat to security. It's deliberate homicide, it engages a moral offense, and an outrage to human dignity, in a way that a traffic accident, which is just an accident, nothing anybody planned, does not. So it doesn't bother me that the fact that the nation responds to a terrorist attack more than do any one auto crash shouldn't bother anyone I don't think. But if you look at the next two levels of the issue, one is you have what Mother Teresa called the problem that if I think of the mass, I'm paralyzed. "If I think of an individual, I can act," was her quote. If you think of 42,000 deaths a year, you think, wow, what can I ever do about this" And the third step in the process is you finally think, well, we just have to accept auto accidents as the price of using cars for personal freedom. People are just going to get killed and let's not think about it. And it's that final step I think is completely wrong. We don't have to accept auto accidents. We can make the roads far safer than they are today and still have the freedom of owning cars and driving around anywhere we wanted.

NEIL: Yet even an accident, again, in Minneapolis last week the collapse of a bridge and caused a handful of deaths, five people, and of course more are still missing. A terrible tragedy, of course people are extremely concerned, that's nation news. A car accident that kills five, a paragraph on page 13.

GREGG: Yes. I'm sure. I haven't done the numbers but I'm sure that since that Minneapolis bridge collapsed, and it was an awful tragedy, several hundred people have died in individual car accidents and we will now throw billions and billions of dollars in improvements to bridges, which maybe we should do, but what will we do about the far greater number of people who died in car crashes during the same period. My guess is we won't do anything at all.

NEIL: The restrictions, for example, back in the Carter administration when he imposed a 55 mile per hour speed limit on the country, that was not for safety reasons, that was for energy saving reasons. Nevertheless, if you drive slower, fewer people are going to die in traffic accidents.

GREGG: Well, it was Richard Nixon we had to thank for the 55, the old double nickel speed limit. And yes, it was done mainly for energy conservation reasons and traffic fatalities declined when this happened. You might also argue, well, gee, if we all drove at 20 miles per hour, traffic fatalities would decline even further. I don't think that's where the point of emphasis is. The point of emphasis is when you look at modern cars, we know already that deaths per mile traveled are in decline, owing to a lot of good things. Seatbelt use is the main thing. Your seatbelts are far more important than your airbags, but seatbelt use is way up. Most cars now have airbags. Many cars now have anti-lock breaks. Impact engineering, which is a hidden safety feature of a lot of new vehicles, is becoming more common. And drunk driving is way down. The campaign against drunk driving has really been successful. So there are some good things, but if you look at all these factors, you would expect road fatalities to have declined much more than they actually have.

So the countervailing forces seem to be cell phone use. Cell phone use while driving causes at least thousands of avoidable fatalities per year and is completely silly. How can anyone think that you can be paying attention to a modern highway and also dialing a telephone at the same time, yet we don't act against it. Horsepower of modern cars keeps rising. The speed and power of our cars is significantly higher than it was 20 years ago and in a lot of cases this is related to accident rates and we could act against that as well and also bring fuel economy up at the same time.

NEIL: Let's get some listeners involved in the conversation. We're speaking with Gregg Easterbook about something he wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* called "Road Kill." If you'd like to join us, call 800-989-8255. Email is talk@npr.org. Let's start with John. John is calling us from Michigan.

JOHN: This is John Gregory and I've spent the last 20 years commuting across Southern California about 110 miles a day. And I've found that it was very calming to be able to talk on the cell phone to some friends. It was a great stress relief. Other times the

anxiety would be real high. So I think there are some exceptions to that rule that it's inherently dangerous to use a cell phone.

NEIL: You want to continue to be able to use the cell phone in the car?

JOHN: Yes. With the traffic so bad, I think a lot of the traffic accidents are probably just a result of more people on the road.

NEIL: Congestion is more to blame, argues John, than the cell phone, Gregg Easterbrook.

GREGG: Well, yes. Congestion is a big factor and I'm sure John, your caller, is very sincere in his comment. But let me just say I'm glad I'm not driving next to him. And you're going to have to change your habits in 2008 because cell phone use while driving will become illegal in California next year.

NEIL: It's illegal in a lot of places and hardly anybody gets stopped for it.

GREGG: Hardly anybody ever gets caught, that's why in this *L.A. Times* piece I point out the things that you can do to make the enforcement more serious. But to add to another factor that we haven't mentioned yet, and this is really a factor in John's life in California. The very high rates of immigration into the United States have increased auto accidents. Immigrants as a group are much more likely to be involved in or to cause auto accidents than our native born Americans and it's just a fact, it's not (unintelligible), but it's a fact. And as we continue to allow record numbers of immigrants into the country, they tend to buy used cars with lower safety standards than the brand new cars have and now they're tending buy the used SUVs that nobody wants and those are the most dangerous things in the road. We're putting them in the hands of a group that, not as individuals but as a group, has very poor driving statistics and yes, you would expect that they're going to crash into people and that's happening, especially in California.

NEIL: John, in his piece Gregg Easterbrook proposes one solution to what he describes as a cell phone problem and that is that there should be a presumption that if you're talking on the cell phone at the moment an accident occurs, you are presumed to be at fault.

JOHN: I think that's reaching and I'm not sure that saying immigrants are worse drivers. In southern California you're talking about a large percentage of the population. It's just that if they're driving older cars that might be a factor but I can't see that they're any worse drivers than United States born citizens. I don't buy it.

NEIL: What statistics do you have, Gregg Easterbrook, to refute that?

GREGG: I can't cite them all on the air but there have been studies of this and there have been studies that break down driving habits by country of origin, by age, by type of vehicle driven. My main message to your listeners is watch out for pickup trucks because pickup trucks are far more likely to get into accidents than any other class of commonly driven vehicle. Sadly it's been studied and the insurance acts indirectly, not on a government policy sense, but indirectly by raising the rates for most groups that have high accident occurrence. But in general we don't find this in public policy.

NEIL: All right. John, thank you very much for the call. Appreciate it. Let's talk now with Jerry. Jerry is with us from Missouri.

JERRY: Yes. I agree with your point very much so. I've always been mystified. I come from a background in airline safety. If three or four times a week a 737 fully loaded with passengers fell out of the sky, people would be outraged and there'd be demands that something happen. But we have the same level of fatalities and I kind of blame it on the fact that we are -- proficiency of drivers. You get a license at 16, you keep it until you drop dead with little or no formal training. And on the other side of that coin, we have to furnish people who choose not to drive or cannot with some form of public transportation. We almost force people who are not good drivers or who would choose not to drive, we force them on the road.

I do take exception to the communication thing because I would ask your guest if you fly on board a commercial flight, the people are operating that plane and communicating at the same time, so it can be done. But I think we are long behind protecting our -- this is to me a huge, almost scandalous.

NEIL: Thanks very much for the call.

GREGG: I'm not sure that parallel to aviation works. When you talk about flight deck crew, you're talking about people who are not only very highly trained, much more highly trained than drivers as your caller points out. They are communicating all the time but they are communicating by a very strict set of rules. The FAA strictly regulates what you can talk about and what you can't talk about, not only over the radio, but also to the guy sitting next to you. If your caller is in the aviation industry, he knows the sterile cockpit rule. Below 10,000 feet, flight deck personnel are only allowed to discuss the operation of the aircraft.

In the situation in terms of pilot workload and driver workload below 10,000 feet, it's about what you get on any sort of highway in the United States when traffic is going 70 miles per hour and people are changing lanes, you need the same degree of attention to operate a car as you do an aircraft at low altitude.

NEIL: We're talking with Gregg Easterbrook, a fellow at the Brookings Institution and author of the book, *The Progress Paradox*. Also the author of the *L.A. Times* op ed. "Road Kill." If you'd like to join the conversation, 800-989-8255. Talk email is talk@npr.org. And this is Talk of the Nation coming to you from NPR news. This is Dave on the line. Dave is calling us from Utah.

DAVE: Hi. I used to be an over-the-road truck driver. I've since found a better way to make a living, but almost all of the large trucking companies, there's over 3 million over-the-road trucks on the road every day and they use the Qualcomm system. If you think that dialing a telephone is dangerous, text messaging with the Qualcomm system, it says right on the device that you're not supposed to use it while driving, however dispatchers and trucking companies want to keep you moving and they push you to do this anyway. There are lots of situations where you cannot pull over a 75-foot vehicle, and I wonder if your guest has looked into this at all and if he has done any studies on it. I'll take my answers off the air, thank you.

Neil: Thanks, Dave.

GREGG: Well, certainly you're going to guess that I'm not in favor of truck drivers or anybody text messaging while driving. There was a real good book about modern working conditions for over-the-road truck drivers called *Sweat Shops on Wheels*. It came out about three years ago. I would commend it to your attention that the companies do push drivers to keep moving and sacrifice the safety to all of us. I don't blame the drivers because they're under pressure to keep the wheels of the truck spinning. But no, it's not safe. If we cared more about safety, we would more closely regulate trucking companies.

NEIL: You also raised questions as to why we tend to ignore the numbers. For example, you point out that car companies are some of the biggest advertisers on television.

GREGG: Automobile industry is the number one television adviser and for most newspapers, they vary slightly by region, but for most newspapers they're in the top three. So I think there is a psychological barrier there to discussing this issue. In the media these car companies are so sensitive about, doesn't matter here on NPR because you don't take advertising, but for the local television station or the local radio I do think it's a factor.

NEIL: Let's see if we can get another caller in. This will be Neil, another Neil. This one calling from Michigan.

NEIL (Caller): I was just calling to ask about automation in vehicles. Taking the human ego off the road altogether, off of our freeways, and I know the psychology probably isn't going to be around for another 20 years or so, but what about that?

NEIL: Automatic highways that would drive your car for you.

NEIL (Caller): Autonomous vehicles.

NEIL: Or autonomous vehicles, one or the other. Gregg Easterbrook, going to be some years off.

GREGG: People have been talking about this since those *Popular Mechanics* issues of the 1950s. In principal it could be done, but all proposed means by which to automate cars involves such extensive infrastructure engineering. Basically you'd have to

reengineer every single road in the country. I think that until somebody invents a cheap wireless way to do it, it's not going to happen. However, I will warn your callers this thought creeps me out, but automated aviation is not that far away. A lot of the manufacturers of very light jets already have fully automated small jets on the drawing board. It's actually if you think about the way the sky looks versus the ground driving environment, it's easier to imagine an automated vehicle moving in the sky than it is moving on the ground.

NEIL: Thanks, Neil. Let me ask you. I mean you've proposed some, what some people would regard as drastic solutions, again that idea of just presuming if you're talking on a cell phone that you're responsible for the accident that you're in. In terms of the horsepower, which causes people to drive so quickly, you said, look, there's nothing in the constitution that says you should be allowed to buy something that's overpowered.

GREGG: People say well nobody can tell me what I can drive. But that's ridiculous. The constitution says you've got a right to own a gun and you've got a right to read a newspaper. Those are the two protected categories of possessions. Courts have consistently ruled that automobiles and trucks can be regulated for public purposes such as safety. The key statistic is in the last 20 years, the average horsepower of a new car or vehicle, pickup truck, SUV, etc, sold in the United States has almost doubled. It used to be a small number of Americans drove high horsepower vehicles. Now the majority of Americans drive high horsepower vehicles. Why do we think that road rage has happened in the last 10 years? Because now the majority of people have cars you can drive aggressively in. Cut people off and dart in front and change lanes, etc. Horsepower is not exactly but roughly proportionate to fuel consumption. If we cut the horsepower of new vehicles by roughly one third, road rage would decline in the United States. The roads would become safer and fewer people would die every year. And 10 years of newer vehicles with one third better gas mileage is all the country needs to eliminate the amount of oil that we import from the Persian Gulf.

It's that simple. We could accomplish so much for our own personal safety and reduction of oil dependency and yet Congress isn't even discussing this.

NEIL: Perhaps because they like getting reelected from time to time.

GREGG: Yes, there's a political pressure factor involved in all of this. Congress has been more cowardly on automobile and fuel economy regulation than on any other single subject in the last 25 years. It's been about 25 years since Congress has raised fuel economy standards. And you could understand up to a point psychologically why it is not just the donations from lobbyists, but we all psychologically don't want to think about the bad things that can happen to us personally. We know that Twinkies are bad for us but we eat them anyway. We can die on the road, we jump in the car anyway. We want to talk about airborne mercury or terrorism threats that are almost certain to happen to us, but we don't want to think about the things that will happen to us, like getting killed in a car.

NEIL: Gregg Easterbrook, thank you very much. You can read his op ed in the *Los Angeles Times* called "Road Kill." I'm Neil Conan, this is NPR news.

BILL SEYMOUR: This has been an Infocast. Brought to you by the Connecticut Department of Motor Vehicles. Thank you for listening.