

'It's gut-wrenching:' 373 fatal crashes in Region claim 404 lives over five years

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Body

Sept. 16--It's a gut-wrenching network of congested, **deadly** corridors most of us travel each day in Northwest Indiana.

A Times computer-assisted probe reveals 373 fatal road **crashes** over five years killed 404 people in Lake, Porter and LaPorte counties.

The roads tallying the highest body counts are nearly impossible for most of us to avoid, comprising the main and most congested traffic arteries in the Region.

Meanwhile, some potential fixes to alleviate the problem, including a long-proposed new stretch of interstate, remain politically elusive.

Former LaPorte County Police Capt. Michael Kellems said he still **gets** chills when he thinks back on two triple-fatal car accidents that occurred exactly two **months** apart last year along the same stretch of U.S. 20 north of LaPorte.

In both cases, passenger vehicles crossed the centerline of the highway and collided with oncoming vehicles.

"It's gut wrenching," said Kellems, a 32-year police veteran, who now works as manager of safety at the Duneland School Corp.

The two fatal **crashes** were among 27 last year in LaPorte County, which was a five-year high, according to Dona Sapp, senior policy analyst with the Indiana University Public Policy Institute.

Porter County also hit a five-year high last year with 28 traffic fatalities, while Lake County was down to 51 from 59 in 2015, she said, quoting figures pending final approval for publication in the forthcoming Traffic Safety Facts: County Profiles, 2017 report compiled by the IU Public Policy Institute.

"That's big numbers for an individual county," she said of the double-digit increases in Porter and LaPorte counties.

The statewide number of traffic deaths as of early this **month** is down by nearly 100 as compared to the same period last year, said Will Wingfield, communications director for the Indiana Criminal Justice Institute, which produces its Annual Highway Safety Plan.

A Times computer-assisted probe of roadway fatality data kept by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration revealed that there were 211 fatal vehicle **crashes** with 226 people killed between 2010 and 2014 in Lake County, 84 **crashes** and 95 killed in LaPorte County, and 78 **crashes** with 83 killed in Porter County.

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Perilous corridors

Leading the way is the perilous interstate corridor shared by I-80/94 and I-90, including the Indiana Toll Road.

The Times probe of 373 Region roadway accidents over five years revealed 50 fatal **crashed** claimed 56 lives along that corridor, making it the Region's **deadliest** roadway.

The Region accounts for 41 percent of Indiana's I-80 corridor -- but a 78 percent of the people killed and 89 percent of the fatal **crashes** along that route in Indiana between 2010 and 2014.

Compared to the I-80 corridor from coast to coast, the Region's portion accounts for 2.1 percent of the nation's I-80 corridor but 6 percent of the people killed and 6 percent of the fatal **crashes** on the entire corridor.

Other top **deadly** stretches revealed in The Times probe, in descending order, are U.S. 20, U.S. 30, U.S. 41, Ind. 2 and Interstate 65.

But congested highways are the common pot in which the tragedy is cooked.

The Region stretch of Interstate 80/94 near the Illinois state line sees as many as 151,000 passenger cars and 50,000 commercial vehicles passing through daily, according to Adam Parkhouse, media relations director for the Indiana Department of Transportation's northwest district.

Highs of nearly 80,000 passenger cars and 19,000 commercial vehicles pass daily along Interstate 65 near the interchange with U.S. 30, he said.

The strip of U.S. 30 near the Southlake Mall sees as many as 62,000 passenger cars and 3,600 commercial vehicles daily, Parkhouse said.

U.S. 41 experiences as many as 41,000 passenger cars and 1,700 commercial vehicles each day near the intersection with U.S. 30, he said.

U.S. 20 can carry as many as 23,000 passenger cars and 3,500 commercial vehicles each day through Michigan City and more than 16,000 passenger cars in the eastern part of LaPorte County.

Deadly U.S. highways

Though the Region's main interstate corridor is our Region's **deadliest** stretch of roadway, U.S. highways, which overlap with municipal and county roads, account for the largest cumulative number of fatal **crashes** and deaths.

A special set of characteristics, blending pedestrians with high-volume vehicle traffic and undivided highways, make it so, authorities said.

Lake, Porter and LaPorte county U.S. highways -- including U.S. 20, U.S. 30 and U.S. 41 -- accounted for 99 fatal **crashes** in which 106 people died over five years.

"It's pretty frequent that people are walking along that road," he said.

A total of 31 fatal **crashes** claimed 33 lives on that stretch of Northwest Indiana highway, The Times probe shows.

U.S. 20 also poses a problem because, unlike the expressways, there is no center divider, which creates plenty of opportunity for head-on collisions, Sosby said. This was the case in October 2017 when an elderly woman driving at a high rate of speed crossed the center line and struck another vehicle head on, killing herself and a 17-year-old Chesterton High School honor roll student driving the other vehicle.

What's missing along the city's stretch of U.S. 20 is clearly marked center striping and rumble strips cut into the roadway to warn motorists when they start drifting into oncoming lanes.

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The Indiana Department of Transportation has undertaken or is planning a number of safety improvement projects along U.S. 20 and the other corridors with high fatality numbers, Parkhouse said. The U.S. 20 work includes repaving and the addition of turn lanes and shoulder rumble strips in LaPorte County, he said.

Improvements also are planned for U.S. 41, the Region's 4th deadliest roadway, including the addition of a center turn lane from 77th Avenue to U.S. 231, Parkhouse said. The project could be underway in 2020. Fifteen fatal crashes claimed 15 lives over five years on that highway.

INDOT already performed some intersection improvements last year along U.S. 30 in Merrillville aimed at increasing safety, he said. These included the addition of a turn lane at Rhode Island Avenue and work at Mississippi Street.

Relief valve

The number of crashes corresponds with the higher number of vehicles, and Lake Michigan forces a plethora of traffic through the narrow corridor of Northwest Indiana into and out of Chicago, Indiana Criminal Justice Institute spokesman Wingfield said.

"We see that hotspot, but it's not immediately evident the cause behind it."

A proposed relief valve for Region highway congestion -- a long-discussed a new four-lane interstate connecting Interstate 65 in Indiana with Interstate 55 in Illinois -- has been stalled by political forces.

An alternative to this Illiana Expressway also was pitched last year and called for the construction of a toll-based expressway connecting the Indiana Toll Road to four interstates, culminating with I-80 near Morris, Illinois.

Indiana State Police Lt. Terry Gose, who is very familiar with the traffic patterns along the local stretch of Interstate 94 as district commander at the Indiana State Police Lowell post, agrees that problems increase when there are more people on the roads.

It takes just one event on the highway to slow traffic and create conditions optimal for accidents, he said.

When traffic is creeping along slowly during heavy traveled times, such as Fridays and Sundays, crashes tend be more minor, Gose said. But the more serious and deadly crashes occur when a fast moving vehicle collides with slowed or stopped traffic.

"Those tend to be some of the most horrific crashes we have," he said.

When backups begin to occur, Gose said his fellow officers try to position themselves 100 yards behind the slow-down with emergency lights on to warn oncoming vehicles to decrease their speed.

"It's not a perfect solution, but it's one of the things we do to help lessen that," he said.

"We want to make people see us," he said. "We want to make people safe."

First responder challenges

When crashes do occur, state and local police departments are joined on the busy highways by local firefighters.

The city of Hammond is among the local communities with both Interstate 80/94 and the Toll Road within its jurisdiction.

"It's a headache for us," said Deputy Hammond Fire Chief Kevin Margraf.

Part of the problem is that many of the motorists on either highway are just passing through and are often unable to give reliable locations when reporting accidents, he said.

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"There's a lot of wasted miles out there at times," he said of his department's attempts to locate a crash scene.

The Interstate 90 Toll Road poses a unique challenge because it is narrow, and there can be inadequate shoulder room for trucks to reach crashes when traffic is backed up, he said.

The Portage Fire Department faces the same challenges, in addition to receiving a wide variety of calls to the highways, said Assistant Fire Chief Tim Sosby.

Work continues to improve safety and mobility along Interstate 80/94 and an added travel lane along the Lake County stretch of Interstate 65, said Parkhouse.

"INDOT personnel are always keeping an eye on potential areas of concern and addressing safety issues both preemptively and as they arise," he said.

Region's Top 10 Deadliest Roads

U.S. 12

U.S. 12

Region deadly ranking: #10

Fatal crashes: 7

Total killed: 9

Deadliest county on the stretch: Lake County -- five fatal crashes claiming seven lives

Deadliest city/town on the stretch: Gary -- four fatal crashes claiming six lives

Most common vehicles involved: Four-door sedans were involved in four fatal accidents.

Deadliest month(s): July -- two fatal crashed killed three people from 2010-14.

Deadliest day of the week: Friday -- two crashes killed three people

Daily traffic count: Not available

PHOTO: A woman and her child kneel on U.S. 12 in July 2010 near the site of a fatal car-versus-train wreck.

Times file photo

U.S. 421, Indiana 55 and Indiana 49

U.S. 421, Indiana 55 and Indiana 49

U.S. 421

Region deadly ranking: #9

Fatal crashes: 9

Total killed: 9

Deadliest county on the stretch: All in LaPorte County

Deadliest city/town on the stretch: Michigan City -- five fatal crashes claimed five lives

Most common vehicles involved: Pickup trucks were involved in four fatal crashes.

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Deadliest month(s): Three **crashes** led to three fatalities over five years.

Deadliest day(s) of the week: Tuesday, Saturday and Sunday -- each had two fatalities resulting in two deaths from 2010-14.

Daily traffic county: Not available

Indiana 55

Region **deadly** rank: #9

Fatal **crashes**: 9

Total killed: 9

Deadliest county on the stretch: All in Lake County

Deadliest city/town on the stretch: Merrillville -- four fatal **crashes** claiming four lives

Most common vehicles involved: Minivans were involved in three fatal **crashes**.

Deadliest month(s): June and July -- each **month** had 2 fatal **crashes** claiming two lives over five years.

Deadliest day of the week: Thursday -- three fatal **crashes** killed three people

Daily traffic count: More than 21,000 passenger cars and 600 commercial vehicles travel the stretch daily.

Indiana 49

Region **deadly** ranking: #9

Fatal **crashes**: 9

Total killed: 9

Deadliest county on the stretch: All in Porter County

Deadliest city/town on the stretch: Valparaiso -- four fatal **crashes** claiming four lives

Most common vehicles involved: Smaller sports utility vehicles were involved in **six** fatal **crashes**.

Deadliest month(s): May and November -- two fatal **crashes** killed two people in each of the **months**.

Deadliest day of the week: Tuesday -- four fatal **crashes** claiming four lives

Daily traffic count: As many as 27,000 passenger cars and 4,000 commercial vehicles travel the stretch daily.

PHOTO: Site of a 2016 fatal hit-run accident along U.S. 421, about a quarter mile north of U.S 30.

Photo provided

Indiana 53 (Broadway)

Indiana 53 (Broadway)

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Region **deadly** rank: #8

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Fatal accidents: 10

Total killed: 10

Deadliest county on the stretch: All in Lake County

Deadliest city/town on the stretch: Gary -- eight fatal **crashes** claiming eight lives

Most common vehicle involved: Four-door sedans were involved in five fatal **crashes**

Deadliest month(s): Four fatal **crashes** claimed four lives in November from 2010-14.

Deadliest day of the week: Monday -- three fatal **crashes** killed three people

Daily traffic count: As many as 24,000 passenger cars and more than 600 commercial vehicles travel Indiana 53 each day.

PHOTO: The Lake County sheriff's accident reconstruction team assists Gary police in 2016 after a driver fatally struck a pedestrian in the southbound lanes of Broadway near 19th Avenue.

Times file photo

U.S. 35

U.S. 35

Region **deadly** rank: #7

Fatal **crashes**: 9

Total killed: 13

Deadliest county on the stretch: All in LaPorte County

Deadliest city/town on the stretch: Kingsbury -- four fatal **crashed** claiming **six** lives

Most common vehicles involved: Four-door sedans were involved in eight fatal **crashes**.

Deadliest month(s): One fatal **crash** claimed three lives in the **month** of February and 2 fatal **crashes** claimed two lives in the **month** of August from 2010-14.

Deadliest day of the week: Tuesday -- three fatal **crashed** killed five people

Daily traffic count: Not available

PHOTO: One person was airlifted and seven others transported via ambulance to area hospitals with injuries following a three-vehicle **crash** on U.S. 35 in LaPorte County in 2016.

Photo provided

Interstate 65

Interstate 65

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Region **deadly** ranking: #6

Fatal **crashes**: 13

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Total killed: 14

Deadliest county on the stretch: All in Lake County

Deadliest city/town on the stretch: Lowell -- four fatal **crashes** claiming five lives

Most common vehicle involved: Semis were involved in five fatal **crashes** from 2010-14.

Deadliest month(s): Four fatal **crashes** killed four people in the **month** of August from 2010-14.

Deadliest days of the week: Thursday and Friday -- each had three fatal **crashes** killing three people

Daily traffic count: As many as 80,000 passenger cars and 19,000 commercial vehicles pass daily along Interstate 65 near the interchange with U.S. 30.

PHOTO: A roadside memorial on Interstate 65 in Hobart commemorates the death of Brandon Fiscus, of LaPorte. Fiscus was using a concrete saw in a construction zone when he was struck and killed by an SUV in 2016.

Times file photo

Indiana 2

Indiana 2

Region **deadly** ranking: #5

Fatal **crashes**: 13

Total killed: 22

Deadliest county on the stretch: Porter County -- five fatal **crashes** claiming **six** lives

Deadliest city/town on the stretch: Lowell -- five fatal **crashes** claiming **six** lives

Most common vehicle involved: Five four-door sedans and four pickup trucks were involved in fatal **crashes** from 2010-14.

Deadliest month(s): Three fatal **crashes** killed three people in the **month** of May and 2 fatal **crashed** killed three people in the **month** of January between 2010-14.

Deadliest day of the week: Wednesday -- four **crashes** killed five people

Daily traffic count: One stretch of Indiana 2 in Lake County experiences as many as 7,353 passenger cars and 1,695 commercial vehicles daily.

PHOTO: A towing worker, left, secures a motorcycle in May 2012 after it was involved in a fatal **crash** at County Road 450 East and Indiana 2 in Washington Township in eastern Porter County.

Times file photo

U.S. 41

U.S. 41

Region **deadly** ranking: #4

Fatal **crashes**: 15

Total killed: 15

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Deadliest county on the stretch: All in Lake County

Deadliest city/town on the stretch: Hammond -- five fatal **crashes** claiming five lives

Most common vehicle involved: 10 four-door sedans were involved in fatal **crashes** from 2010-14.

Deadliest month(s): Four fatal **crashes** killed four people in the **month** of June between 2010-14.

Deadliest day of the week: Sunday -- five fatal **crashes** killed five people

Daily traffic count: U.S. 41 experiences as many as 41,000 passenger cars and 1,700 commercial vehicles each day near the intersection with U.S. 30.

PHOTO: A grey Hyundai Elantra lays on it's roof partially on top of a U-Haul trailer in the parking lot of Brandys on U.S. 41 in Schererville in 2014.

Times file photo

U.S. 30

U.S. 30

Region **deadly** ranking: #3

Fatal **crashes**: 20

Total killed: 20

Deadliest county on the stretch: Porter County -- 10 fatal **crashes** claimed 10 lives

Deadliest city/town on the stretch: Valparaiso -- 10 fatal **crashes** claimed 10 lives

Most common vehicle involved: 10 semis and 10 four-door sedans were involved in fatal accidents over five years.

Deadliest month(s): Four of the fatal **crashes** occurred in the **month** of May from 2010-14.

Deadliest day of the week: Friday -- **six** fatal **crashes** killed **six** people

Daily traffic count: The strip of U.S. 30 near the Southlake Mall sees as many as 62,000 passenger cars and 3,600 commercial vehicles daily.

PHOTO: Investigators work at the scene of a fatal accident between a semi-tractor trailer and Jeep Patriot at the intersection of U.S. 30 and 600 West in Union Township in April 2012.

Times file photo

U.S. 20

U.S. 20

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Deadly ranking: #2

Fatal **crashes**: 31

Total killed: 33

Deadliest county on the stretch: Lake County -- 13 **crashes** claimed 14 lives

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Deadliest city/town on the stretch: LaPorte -- **six crashes** claimed seven lives

Most common vehicle involved: 22 4-door sedans were involved in fatal accidents.

Deadliest month(s): June led all **months** for fatal **crashes** and fatalities over five years, with **six** fatal **crashes** leading to **six** deaths from 2010-14.

Deadliest day of the week: Wednesday -- **six** fatal **crashes** claimed **six** lives

Daily traffic count: U.S. 20 can carry as many as 23,000 passenger cars and 3,500 commercial vehicles each day through Michigan City and more than 16,000 passenger cars in the eastern part of LaPorte County.

PHOTO: The Porter County Sheriff's Department accident re-construction team documents the scene of a **crash** on U.S. 20 in the town of Porter.

Times file photo

Interstate 80/94/90 corridor

Interstate 80/94/90 corridor

Region **deadly** rank: #1

Fatal **crashes**: 50

Total killed: 56

Deadliest county on the stretch: Lake County -- 29 fatal **crashes** claiming 29 lives

Deadliest city/town on the stretch: Hammond -- 13 fatal **crashes** claiming 13 lives

Most common vehicles involved: Semis were involved in 33 fatal **crashes**, followed by 4-door sedans at 25.

Deadliest month(s): September and October led all **months** for fatal **crashes** and fatalities over five years.

10 fatal **crashes** that killed 10 people occurred in September between 2010-14.

9 fatal **crashed** killed 17 people in October between 2010-14.

Deadliest day of the week: Thursday -- 11 fatal **crashes** killed 15 people

Daily traffic count: 151,000 passenger cars and 50,000 commercial vehicles travel the corridor daily in Northwest Indiana.

PHOTO: A Hammond **man** who was a passenger in this car was killed when it collided with a bus in October 2013 on Interstate 80/94 just east of Indianapolis Boulevard.

Times file photo

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