

Looked, But Did Not See

This article was written by Dave Werner, Co-Chairman, Franklin County Traffic Safety Board's DKY series. For more more of his articles, visit the TSB [website](http://www.franklincony.org) at www.franklincony.org.

A PROBLEM FOR OLDER DRIVERS

Ever hear someone say, after being in a fender bender crash, "I looked but didn't see him coming?" Actually this is more common than you might expect, especially for older drivers. In a [report](#) from the March 3rd, 2015, issue of "[Status Report](#)" by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), institute researchers used information from a national in-depth study of over 5,000 passenger vehicle crashes to examine critical driver factors that led to crashes among drivers 70 and older, compared with drivers 35-54.



Errors that older drivers frequently make differ in important ways from those of middle-age drivers. The most common critical error among older drivers was inadequate surveillance (33 percent), followed by misjudging the length of a gap between vehicles or another vehicle's speed, failure to obey traffic controls or other illegal maneuvers, medical events, and daydreaming (6 percent each). Inadequate surveillance, and gap or speed misjudgment errors were significantly more prevalent among older drivers compared with middle-aged, according to the study.

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Top driver factors in crashes (by driver age)

	ages 70+	ages 35-54
Inadequate surveillance	33%	22%
Gap/speed misjudgement	6%	3%
Medical events	6%	4%
Failure to obey traffic controls or other illegal maneuvers	6%	4%
Daydreaming	6%	4%

Surveillance errors included: looking, but not seeing; and failing to look. Drivers 70 years and older had the most trouble with the former. Among older drivers who made critical surveillance errors, 71 percent of their crashes were attributed to looking, but not seeing, another vehicle or failing to see a traffic control, compared with 40 percent of middle-age drivers who were more likely to fail to look at all.

The study found that about two-thirds of older drivers' inadequate surveillance errors and 77 percent of their gap or speed misjudgment errors were made when they turned left at intersections. Numerous studies have shown that older drivers are overinvolved in angle, overtaking, merging and intersection crashes, especially those involving left turns, according to IIHS research.

Furthermore, compared with middle-age drivers, physical factors were most often the cause when older drivers left their lanes or traveled off the road prior to crashing, which occurred in about a quarter of crashes. Most of these physical-factor events involved blackouts, drowsiness or seizures. In contrast, when middle-age drivers were involved in these types of crashes it was more often due to distraction, speeding, or overcompensating when drifting than a physical or medical factor.

Anne McCartt, a co-author of the IIHS study and IIHS's senior vice president for research, says errors older drivers commonly make stem from the typical issues associated with aging, including declines in cognitive, perceptual and physical abilities.

Countermeasures that simplify or remove the need to make left turns across traffic, such as roundabouts and protected left-turn signals could decrease the frequency of inadequate surveillance and gap or speed misjudgment errors. Replacing a traffic signal or stop sign with a roundabout improves safety because the roundabout's tight circle forces drivers to slow down, and all traffic flows in the same direction.

We can't prevent aging, but as we age, we can be more aware of our shortcomings and change our driving habits accordingly.

Reference

Intersections challenge older drivers. *Status Report*, Vol. 50, No. 2. Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (www.iihs.org)