

THE KANSAS CITY STAR

Warning sign for boomers is clear

Those over 65 drive less safely now, numbers show – especially when making left turns

By DONALD BRADLEY

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Back in '63, they cruised to "Little Deuce Coupe."

Now it seems some of the older baby boomers are struggling to make a left turn.

Slowed reaction time, bad eyes and reduced cognitive ability are catching up with America's largest and most ballyhooed generation.

That's a problem for them as well as everyone else out on the road because, according to a study released Wednesday, America's 34 million drivers over age 65 are involved in a disproportionate number of fatal crashes.

Many of those wrecks occur at intersections, calling into question the ability of older drivers to judge gaps or estimate speeds of other vehicles.

But the study, Keeping Baby Boomers Mobile, makes no push for heightened restrictions or more frequent driving tests for these older drivers.

That probably comes as calming news to boomers, bound to be the most robust, vibrant and active 65-plus crowd in history. Unlike their parents at this age, they don't just drive to see the grandkids or doctor. They drive to work. The gym. Happy hour.

They value their car as a vital organ and would be quick to throw down any attempt to limit their driving or take their keys.

Authors of the study, Trip, a national transportation group, and the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO), instead call for roadway safety improvements: better lighting, larger lettering on signs, wider use of reflective pavement markings and rumble strips.

Some of that work already is being done in Missouri, as part of a national effort.

The work must be done in order to serve a generation bound and determined to maintain independent, mobile lifestyles for as long as possible, Trip research director Frank Moretti said at a press conference.

"It's absolutely critical to have policies in place to meet their needs," Moretti said.

The first of the boomers hit 65 last year and are pouring in droves over that demographic line. Over the next 15 years, the population of Americans over 65 is expected to increase 60 percent. The new

study says that by 2025, one in every five drivers will be 65 or older. Currently most are men, but women are closing fast.

California has the most with more than 3 million. Missouri has 700,242; Kansas has 327,003.

Marvelline Jackson of Kansas City can't imagine hanging up the keys. She's 69, but says she's different than her mother at that age.

"She had people drive her around — it's different now," Jackson said Wednesday in the parking lot of a Sun Fresh market in Westport. "I go everywhere myself and don't plan on stopping anytime soon, if ever.

"Independence is tied to cars, that's just the way it is, and nobody is going to be in a hurry to give that up."

The authors acknowledge the difference between older Americans and older, older Americans.

Age 65 is where the crash uptick begins. It steepens greatly in the mid-70s and 80s. Injuries become more serious, too, because of physical frailty and existing medical conditions.

Vision, dexterity and reaction times also deteriorate with age.

Intersections tend to be most problematic. According to 2010 statistics by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 37 percent of all fatal accidents where at least one driver was 65 or older occurred at a crossing. In fatalities where drivers were younger, only 20 percent were at intersections.

Specifically dangerous for seniors are left turns that require speed and gap judgments to be made simultaneously. The new study cited researchers at the University of Kentucky who concluded that each advancing year after age 65 increased by 8 percent the odds of getting into a crash that involves a left turn.

The collage shows several front pages of The Kansas City Star. The top page features the main headline "Warning sign for boomers is clear" with a sub-headline "Those over 65 drive less safely now, numbers show — especially when making left turns." Other visible headlines include "QUIXOTIC FUSION | Group headed for world stage", "CONSERVATION | Plan announced in December", "KCP&L SHELVES ENERGY INCENTIVE", "KC troupe mixing dance, music and tech flying high", and "Arts ensemble will perform at TEDx2012 conference next week in Long Beach, Calif." The collage also includes weather forecasts, sports news, and various advertisements.

Drivers 65 and older account for only 8 percent of miles driven, but 17 percent of all fatal accidents involved at least one driver 65 or older.

Florida led the nation in 2010 with 503 of those.

Missouri had 154, Kansas 99. Still, because of better health care, awareness of nutrition, more education and higher income, today's seniors will be working longer and driving more.

"This is a generation that doesn't want to just run errands or go to the store — they want to hit the road," said AASHTO executive director John Horsley. "They want to get out and have fun."

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