

Traffic fatalities in Jackson County drop in 2009

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Citizen

Patriot file photoA pickup truck and a motorcycle were involved in a fatal accident on Elm Road in June 2008. Brandi Osborn was known as "the warden" among her husband's friends because she rarely let him go out alone so she could drive in case he opted to drink.

On Nov. 21, Greg Osborn, 27, went out without her. He had a couple of beers at a bar in Napoleon Township and headed to a friend's house. Not wearing a seat belt, he was thrown from his Dodge Durango when it left the road and hit a tree.

He died at the scene, leaving his wife to care and provide for their three children.

Greg Osborn was one of 12 people to die in traffic crashes last year in Jackson County, down from 17 in 2008, 24 in 2007 and 22 in 2006.

The number of fatalities statewide also decreased, from 1,084 in 2006 and 2007 to 980 in 2008. Final statewide 2009 numbers are not available, but preliminary estimates indicate last year's number also will be less than 1,000, according to the state police.

Improvements in vehicle designs, road engineering and emergency medical treatment contribute to the decline, but police and other officials attribute the decrease largely to efforts to both curb drunken driving and encourage seat belt use.

The goal is to get people to voluntarily comply with laws, which makes the roads and people traveling them safer, said Michigan State Police Sgt. Jill Bennett of the Traffic Safety Division.

"That way we don't have to deliver that death message to the parent of the 17-year-old," she said.

A decline in miles driven as the economy has suffered also might be a contributing factor. In 2007, there were 104.6 billion miles traveled on roads in Michigan, according to information provided by the [Michigan Department of Transportation](#). In 2008, the most recent year available, there were 100.9 billion miles traveled on all roads in the state.

From 2006 to 2008, the number of miles traveled in Jackson County has remained at 1.6 billion.

Police, however, say seat belt use and alcohol are the key factors in crash statistics.

Six of the traffic fatalities last year involved alcohol, said Bev Ward, director of the Jackson County traffic safety program. That is down from seven fatalities in 2008 and 11 in 2006. There were six in 2007, according to state police statistics.

"I think there is more of a recognition on behalf of the public: If you drink, you don't drive," said Jackson County Undersheriff Tom Finco.

Brandi Osborn said she isn't convinced her husband was drunk at the time of his accident. Police said alcohol was a factor, but autopsy results are still incomplete.

She worries he lost control of the SUV because he reached for his cell phone. Brandi said she called him at exactly the time police reported the crash, 1:30 a.m.

Osborn said she often drove her husband around because he had an imperfect driving record and "liked to have fun."

Since his death, she has struggled. "It messed me up a lot," she said this month. "I think the only reason I am making it is because of these three kids."

If she drives even a short distance, she now buckles her seat belt, though she isn't sure it would have kept her husband alive.

"There are always going to be fatalities because some crashes are simply not survivable," Bennett said.

But many crashes are made survivable by safety belt use, officials say. The [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#) estimates lap and shoulder belts, when used correctly, reduce the risk of fatal injury to front-seat car occupants by 45 percent, according to a 2006 administration report revised in 2008.

At least five of the people killed in crashes last year in Jackson County were not wearing seat belts. This includes a motorcycle rider, a man on a motorized bicycle and a man who fell off the back of a truck tailgate.

Sharon Page, 59, was not wearing her seat belt when she died May 18 while driving to Flora List Elementary School on Rives Junction Road.

The much-loved Young 5's teacher lost control of her Nissan Sentra as she headed west on M-50, northwest of Murray Road. The car rolled several times, and she was thrown from the vehicle.

Her daughter, Shanna Page, believes her mother, who insisted her passengers use seat belts, might have had a heart attack and removed the belt because of the pain. An autopsy found she died of injuries to her head and neck.

She had planned to see a doctor the week of her death because she had experienced heart palpitations, said her daughter, who tries not to think about what happened. Instead, she tries to focus on the good times. "I am so blessed to have her as my mom."