

The Record

Road Warrior: Car safety tickets on rise in NJ

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If you thought police were being less vigilant about broken lights, bald tires and cracked windshields since safety inspections were eliminated nearly five years ago, think again -- and keep your checkbook handy.

A review of court records shows tickets for safety violations have been rising substantially since 2009.

Police issued almost 100,000 citations for poorly maintained lights last year -- 13.7% more than in 2009, the year before Motor Vehicle Commission inspectors were limited to checking only exhaust emissions.

Tickets for chipped or broken windshields rose nearly 39% during the same period, to 70,084. And nearly 3,700 cars were caught with worn tires, for a 10% gain.

"I think most of us realized we'd have to be more vigilant now that safety checks were no longer going to be required," said Fair Lawn Patrolman Tim Franco, president of the NJ Police Traffic Officers Association.

Noting that cars were now being built safer than ever, the Christie Admin. ended a 72-year tradition of safety inspections in August 2010 as a way to save \$6 million to \$12 million over time. Emissions testing, a federally funded, anti-pollution mandate, remained intact, however. More than 2 million vehicles visited inspection stations last year under a system that mandates emissions inspection when cars reach 5 years old, then at two-year intervals. Formerly, inspections started after four years and were repeated annually.

This reduced-scheduling plan triggered a road-safety debate that continues today.

Safety advocates and repair shop owners predicted the cutback would lead to more traffic accidents, but crash records don't seem to support that notion. State police figures show road deaths slid to an annual average of 582 in the six years beginning with 2008, including a record low of 542 in 2013. Overall crashes dipped to 283,115 in 2013, too -- 6% fewer than in 2008, according to state Department of Transportation figures. Fatalities and injuries also dropped, to 84,631 in 2013 -- 11% fewer than in 2009.

But deaths and injuries attributed to vehicle mechanical issues fell little more than 1%, to 2,143 in 2013 compared with 2,170 in 2009.

"We didn't order any increase in enforcement," said Gary Poedubicky, director of the state Division of Highway Traffic Safety. "Mechanical issues aren't the sort of thing we focus on, but if the record shows there were more tickets issued, that might explain why injuries declined. Motorists don't like it, but sometimes it can have that effect."

Broken lights, bald tires and cracked windshields weren't the only violations to increase. Here are some additional increases gleaned from records kept by the New Jersey Administrative Office of the Courts:

- A nearly 8% jump for faulty mirrors and backup lights, to 2,722 violations last year.
- A 4% hike for obstructed windshields, to 75,692.
- A nearly 23% increase for displaying improper license plates, to 89,703.

"The reality is that some of those numbers should be much higher -- more like 50%" said Sal Risalvato, president of the New Jersey Gasoline, Convenience Store and Automotive Association, which represents some 1,500 gas stations and repair shops. "Police don't see what we see."

Mechanics see trouble

Bald tires and faulty brakes, for example, generally go unnoticed while a car is moving, said Risalvato. Franco agreed, noting that those violations usually become evident only after a crash, an investigation or a routine traffic stop.

Garage mechanics dig much deeper, said Tony Crisalli, an Association member who owns Holmdel Village Exxon in Monmouth County.

"Last month, a customer refused to let us fix the front brakes on his Honda even though we showed him they were rotted through," said Crisalli. "We had to let him go even though he had an hour-and-a-half drive to get home. There was nothing we could do."

The driver appeared capable of paying the \$300 cost of repairs, and his car had passed an emissions inspection on the previous day, said the mechanic. But even if state inspectors had noticed the Honda's faulty brakes, inspectors were not empowered to flunk the car.

It wasn't the first time an unsafe vehicle had left Crisalli's shop. He recalled an earlier example when he serviced a four-door Chevrolet Suburban that had barely survived a crash.

"Duct tape was holding the two right doors in place," he said. "The owner had replaced the side window glass with cardboard. But the car had passed inspection."

Why inspections?

Critics of the inspection system believe it is run backward. They say safety inspections should take precedence over emissions-control inspections.

"As older cars come off the street and newer cars come on, gas emissions keep dropping dramatically, but that's not true about equipment," Crisalli said. "Even though automakers keep making our vehicles safer and more efficient, one thing never changes: Every single mile we roll puts wear and tear on our cars, yet the tendency is to ignore these safety factors."

New Jersey became the 26th state to end its safety inspection program, a move applauded by many motorists, who berated the old tradition as an unnecessary bother in an age of air bags, torsion control, antilock brakes and backup cameras. But police and road safety advocates disagreed, noting that the combination of human error and seemingly small flaws still can lead to big trouble.

"If one of your rear directional lights is out, you might not notice it, so when you're signaling to make a turn, nobody else will notice either," said Franco, the chief traffic-safety officer in Fair Lawn. "And when something's

blocking your windshield, it not only compromises your vision, it compromises the protection the windshield offers everybody else in the car."

Roadside cop checks

Ticket production didn't increase for every equipment violation from 2009 to 2014, however. For example, citations for faulty brakes dropped from 79 to 58 and driving with no brakes dipped from 245 to 209. The number of tickets for faulty horns also fell, from 1,832 to 1,570. So did citations for faulty mufflers, from 6,128 to 4,668.

Compared with 2009, nearly 48 percent fewer motorists — a total of 10,582 — were ticketed in 2014 for failing to make repairs after flunking inspection, probably because there were fewer repairs to make once mechanical inspections had been eliminated. In 2009, ticketing for this offense reached 20,466.

Inspections for safety haven't disappeared, however. The Motor Vehicle Commission uses three mobile vans to make roadside inspections with local police cooperation. Last year, about 69% of the 14,640 vehicles that were spot-checked by van personnel passed. The vans inspected 17,489 in 2009, when 46% passed.

Another once-common violation -- missing seat restraints -- also continued to drop, by 73% statewide in 2014.

"When we do our Ticket or Click It campaigns, we see more and more seat-restraint compliance every year," said Franco.

Tickets for missing seat belts declined in nearly every county, including Bergen (by 28%) and Passaic (26%), Essex (43%) and Morris (39%). But Warren County bucked the trend. Citations for failing to equip cars with seat belts rose 11%.

Crash analysis provided by Staff Writer Dave Sheingold. Email: cichowski@northjersey.com

Driving dangers

| Violation (statute) | Number of violations: 2014 | Number of violations: 2009 |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| Poor lighting maintenance (39:3-66) | 99,948 | 87,846 |
| Missing or non-functioning lights (39:3-61) | 2,797 | 2,266 |
| Faulty tires or equipment (39:3-72) | 3,692 | 3,358 |
| Obstructed windshield (39:3-74) | 75,692 | 72,491 |
| Damaged windshield (39:3-75) | 70,094 | 50,503 |
| Faulty mirrors or backup lights (39:3-71) | 2,722 | 2,529 |
| Improper license plate or number (39:3-33) | 89,703 | 73,005 |
| No brakes (39:3-67) | 209 | 245 |
| Poor brake performance (39:3-68) | 58 | 79 |
| Faulty horn (39:3-69) | 1,570 | 1,832 |
| Faulty muffler (39:3-70) | 4,668 | 6,128 |
| Missing seat restraints (39:3-76.2) | 57,170 | 211,510 |
| Failure to make repairs (39:8-4) | 10,582 | 20,466 |

Source: New Jersey Administrative Office of the Courts