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## Thanksgiving Holiday Period Traffic Fatality Estimate, 2011

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### **Holiday period definition**

Thanksgiving is observed on the fourth Thursday in November. It is always a 4.25-day weekend consisting of Wednesday evening, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. In 2011, the holiday period extends from 6:00 p.m. Wednesday, November 23, to 11:59 p.m. Sunday, November 27.<sup>1</sup>

### **Method and results**

The objective is to estimate the number of deaths that will occur in traffic crashes during the Thanksgiving holiday period based on data available approximately six to eight weeks before the holiday. The estimate developed here includes all traffic deaths from crashes that occur during the holiday period.<sup>2</sup> The procedure involves three steps. First, historical data are used to determine the average fraction holiday fatalities are of total deaths for the month containing the holiday. Second, total traffic deaths for the coming month in which the holiday falls are estimated using a time series forecasting model. Third, the projected total for the month is multiplied by the fraction to obtain the holiday estimate.

Holiday as percent of month. Total November deaths are the estimates published in *Injury Facts*<sup>®</sup> two years after the year of the estimate. This figure is used, rather than a revised estimate or the National Center for Health Statistics final count, because it closely approximates the level of accuracy that the time series estimate will give for total monthly deaths in the current year. Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) data were used to obtain deaths during the holiday periods.

Table 1 shows the total traffic fatalities for the month of November and fatalities from crashes that occurred during the holiday period. Over the 6 years 2004-2009, fatalities during the Thanksgiving holiday period averaged 15.26% of the total fatalities in November.

Time series model and projection. A time series model was developed to forecast an estimate of total traffic deaths for November 2011. An Autoregressive Integrated Moving Average (ARIMA) model was constructed based on 48 months of traffic deaths recorded from October 2007 through September 2011. An ARIMA model was chosen because of the seasonal variations in traffic deaths. The model was developed using the SPSS/PC+ Version 6.1 statistical computer package. The model forecasts total traffic fatalities for November 2011 to be 2,842.

Holiday estimate. Multiplying the projected total fatalities for November 2011 by the fraction obtained in the first step gives an estimate of 434 traffic fatalities from crashes during the holiday period.

### **Confidence interval**

There is uncertainty associated with any estimate. The 90% confidence interval for the estimate of total November deaths is 2,560 to 3,154. If we assume that the fraction of November deaths that occur during the Thanksgiving period is normally distributed, then the 90% confidence interval for that fraction is 14.37% to 16.15%. Combining these two gives the confidence interval for the Thanksgiving period estimate: 368 to 509 traffic deaths.

### **Nonfatal injuries**

Nonfatal injury is defined as medically consulted injuries and these are injuries serious enough that a medical professional was consulted. Medically consulted injuries are not comparable to previous disabling injury estimates. Based on the current medically consulted injury to death ratio of 100:1, and rounded to the nearest hundred, the estimate of the number of nonfatal disabling injuries that will result from crashes during the holiday period is 43,400 with a range of 36,800 to 50,900.

### **Holiday comparison**

A frequently asked question is "How much more dangerous is travel over the Thanksgiving holiday?" There are two aspects of this question that must be considered. First, compared to what? And, second, what about changes in the amount of driving?

We chose to compare the holiday to periods of similar length before and after the holiday. Specifically, from 6:00 p.m. Wednesday to 11:59 p.m. Sunday of the weeks immediately before and after the Thanksgiving weekend. Table 2 shows the fatality data from FARS for 2004 to 2009 for comparable weekends. The average number of traffic deaths during Thanksgiving over those six years was 10.2% higher than the average number of traffic deaths during the comparison periods (535 vs. 486 deaths). The difference between these two means is *not* statistically significant.

The second question concerns changes in the amount of travel, or exposure. We know of no data system that tracks changes in vehicle miles of travel by day of the year on a national basis. Lacking an objective measure of exposure change, we assume that travel is greater on holiday weekends than on nonholiday weekends.

If travel increases by more than 10.2%, then the risk of dying on the holiday is less than during comparable periods. If the travel increase is less than 10.2%, or if travel is actually lower, then the risk of dying in a traffic crash during the Thanksgiving holiday period is greater than during comparable nonholiday periods.

Arnold and Cerrelli (1987) also examined the variation in fatalities during holiday periods.<sup>3</sup> They used FARS data for 1975-1985 to determine average daily fatalities for each day of the week in each month (e.g., Thursdays in November). For the Thanksgiving holiday period, they found that fatalities rose 42% on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and were 19% higher than normal on Thanksgiving Day. Fatalities were normal on the Friday, Saturday, and Sunday following the holiday.

### **Evaluation**

Table 3 compares the actual FARS counts with the Council's estimates for all holidays for which data are available. Seventy-four of the 89 actual counts fall within the 90% confidence interval of the estimate.

### **Notes**

1. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration extends the holiday period to 5:59 a.m. Monday morning in its published tabulations of holiday deaths. Operation C.A.R.E. begins the counting period at 12:01 a.m. Wednesday.
2. This differs from holiday estimates published by the Council in 1991 and earlier years. The estimating method described here is entirely different from the method used by the Council through 1991 when estimates were discontinued. Comparisons should not be made between the holiday data and estimates shown here and holiday data and estimates published in 1991 and earlier years.
3. Arnold, R., & Cerrelli, E.C. (1987). *Holiday Effect on Traffic Fatalities*. DOT HS 807 115. Springfield, VA: National Technical Information Service.

**Table 1. Traffic Deaths During the Thanksgiving Holiday Period as a Percent of Total November Traffic Deaths.**

YEAR	NOVEMBER	THANKSGIVING PERIOD	PERCENT
2004	3,820	556	14.55
2005	3,890	605	15.55
2006	3,670	623	16.98
2007	3,490	542	15.53
2008	3,190	484	15.17
2009	2,910	401	13.78
<i>6-year avg.</i>	<i>3,495</i>	<i>535</i>	<i>15.26</i>

Source: November total from *Injury Facts*<sup>®</sup>; Thanksgiving period from FARS.

**Table 2. Traffic Deaths During Thanksgiving Holiday Periods and Equivalent Nonholiday Periods.**

YEAR	THANKSGIVING PERIOD	EQUIVALENT PERIODS	
		BEFORE	AFTER
2004	556	523	523
2005	605	549	533
2006	623	504	464
2007	542	513	490
2008	484	428	493
2009	401	391	415
<i>6-year avg.</i>	<i>535</i>		<i>486</i>

Source: FARS.

**Table 3. Holiday Estimate Evaluation**

YEAR	ESTIMATE	90% C. I.	ACTUAL	YEAR	ESTIMATE	90% C. I.	ACTUAL
<b>New Year's Day</b>				<b>Labor Day</b>			
1995 .....		(no estimate)		1995 .....	512	457 – 574	490
1996 .....	392	331 – 461	414	1996 .....	544	494 – 598	508
1997 .....	184	124 – 254	176	1997 .....	492	426 – 566	485
1998 .....	514	453 – 581	532	1998 .....	498	447 – 554	447
1999 .....	391	348 – 439	349	1999 .....	468	422 – 518	469
2000 .....	364	322 – 411	* 458	2000 .....	481	430 – 538	514
2001 .....	399	359 – 443	* 338	2001 .....	474	420 – 533	432
2002 .....	533	467 – 608	554	2002 .....	474	413 – 542	536
2003 .....	184	140 – 235	203	2003 .....	488	429 – 555	490
2004 .....	524	450 – 609	549	2004 .....	486	421 – 558	480
2005 .....	392	338 – 453	449	2005 .....	475	420 – 537	500
2006 .....	399	347 – 457	432	2006 .....	533	477 – 595	487
2007 .....	405	354 – 463	387	2007 .....	490	440 – 544	508
2008 .....	498	447 – 555	* 407	2008 .....	439	384 – 501	473
2009 .....	445	394 – 502	458	2009 .....	404	356 – 457	* 351
<b>Memorial Day</b>				<b>Thanksgiving Day</b>			
1995 .....	456	381 – 543	471	1995 .....	527	465 – 596	519
1996 .....	478	411 – 552	494	1996 .....	528	465 – 597	570
1997 .....	473	408 – 546	498	1997 .....	541	480 – 609	554
1998 .....	470	419 – 528	* 383	1998 .....	541	485 – 603	586
1999 .....	470	414 – 534	494	1999 .....	500	441 – 566	* 567
2000 .....	461	404 – 525	451	2000 .....	497	432 – 570	497
2001 .....	468	419 – 523	499	2001 .....	532	455 – 619	580
2002 .....	498	423 – 582	484	2002 .....	575	493 – 667	527
2003 .....	464	396 – 542	472	2003 .....	544	459 – 642	544
2004 .....	476	409 – 551	496	2004 .....	556	476 – 646	556
2005 .....	471	410 – 540	512	2005 .....	610	505 – 735	605
2006 .....	541	487 – 601	493	2006 .....	555	500 – 615	* 623
2007 .....	497	450 – 548	475	2007 .....	564	499 – 635	542
2008 .....	468	420 – 520	* 414	2008 .....	479	415 – 551	484
2009 .....	366	324 – 415	* 462	2009 .....	447	392 – 508	401
<b>Independence Day</b>				<b>Christmas Day</b>			
1995 .....	636	553 – 731	631	1995 .....	422	351 – 502	* 342
1996 .....	653	580 – 734	609	1996 .....	145	113 – 182	136
1997 .....	469	411 – 535	492	1997 .....	563	458 – 680	466
1998 .....	498	448 – 552	458	1998 .....	406	350 – 468	354
1999 .....	503	446 – 567	499	1999 .....	369	316 – 428	* 456
2000 .....	645	578 – 719	683	2000 .....	359	300 – 424	419
2001 .....	198	144 – 260	173	2001 .....	522	417 – 641	575
2002 .....	648	565 – 743	662	2002 .....	160	131 – 193	* 114
2003 .....	520	449 – 602	500	2003 .....	529	438 – 636	488
2004 .....	522	451 – 602	502	2004 .....	440	356 – 536	370
2005 .....	498	444 – 557	* 565	2005 .....	443	352 – 546	383
2006 .....	751	680 – 828	* 629	2006 .....	415	332 – 507	379
2007 .....	203	160 – 251	184	2007 .....	497	424 – 579	454
2008 .....	449	396 – 507	472	2008 .....	432	371 – 500	409
2009 .....	381	336 – 431	398	2009 .....	317	253 – 388	* 248

Source: Estimates from National Safety Council; actual counts from FARS.

\* = outside of 90% confidence interval.