

Alcohol Involvement in New Mexico Crashes

New Mexico has a bad reputation for the number of crashes that involve alcohol. In 1997, 212 people were killed in crashes that involved alcohol. What can be done?

Knowing where crashes that involve alcohol occur is a first step. Divide the state into four sections (NW, SW, SE, and NE. See Table 1 for counties in each quadrant) and consider the number of crashes occurring in each section that involve alcohol. Chart 1 shows the trends in each quadrant.

Alcohol-Involved Crashes by Quadrant

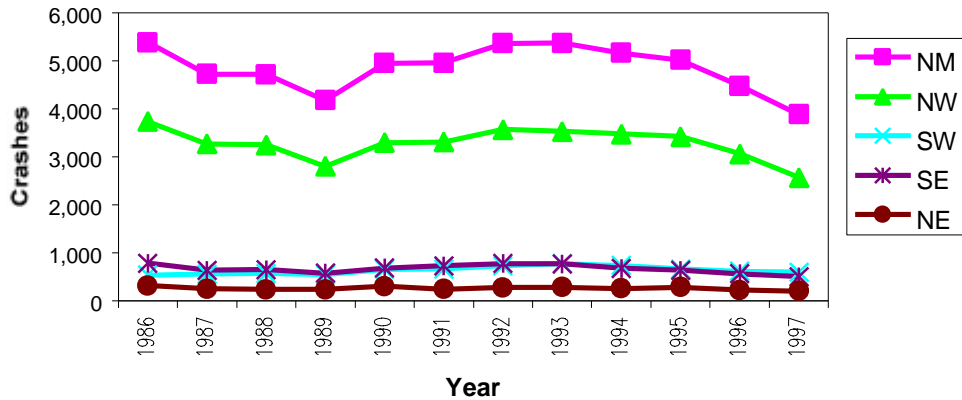


Chart 1

Clearly the trends of the NW quadrant drive the trends for the state. The number of alcohol-involved crashes in the NW quadrant is nearly double the total for the rest of the state.

The number of crashes in the NW is higher than for the rest of the state, but is it out of line, considering the number of people who live in the NW corner? Chart 2 and Chart 3 illustrate the crash rates for each quadrant. Both charts are done to the same scale, but are separated to make it easier to see the individual lines, and the correlation between each quadrant's crash rate and the state crash rate. The NW and SE have strong correlation with the state rate, while the NE and SW do not track the state rate as closely. The NW and SE quadrants account for 74% of the state's population. Despite its close correlation to the state crash rate, the crash rate of the SE quadrant tends to be much lower than the state crash rate.

Serious alcohol-involved crashes¹ were significantly down in 1997 from 1996. Three counties contributed significantly to this decrease: Bernalillo, McKinley, and San Juan counties. See Chart 4, Chart 5, and Chart 6 below. McKinley County has shown consistent improvement in the number of serious alcohol-involved crashes since 1992, with a spike in 1996 (possibly due to the increased speed limits) that was corrected in 1997.

¹ A serious crash is one that results in at least one fatality or incapacitating injury.

Alcohol-Involved Crashes per 100,000 Population

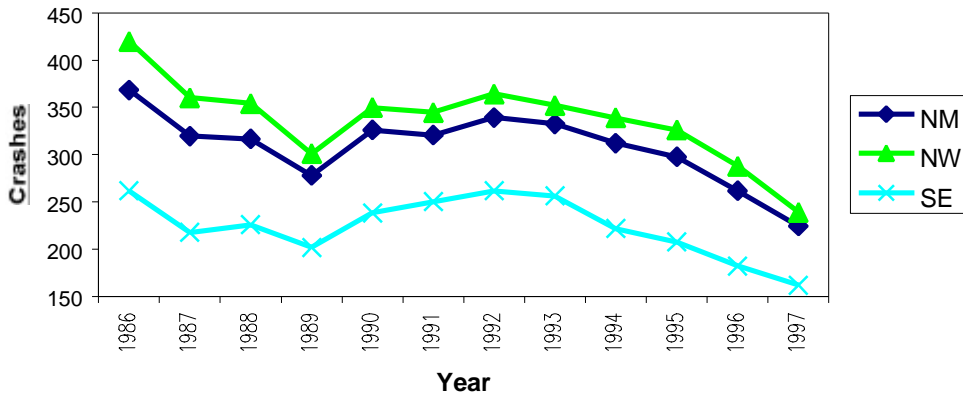


Chart 2

Alcohol-Involved Crashes per 100,000 Population

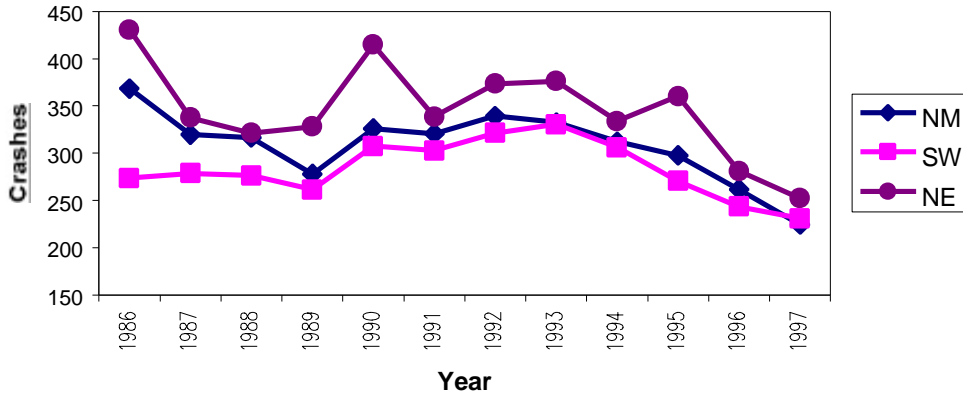


Chart 3

In December 1993, New Mexico began Operation DWI, operating blitzes every other month -- the number of alcohol-involved crashes stopped rising in 1993. Operation DWI continued with blitzes every other month until January 1996, when monthly blitzes began. The number of crashes that involved alcohol declined sharply in 1996, compared to 1995. Bernalillo County, in addition to participation in Operation DWI, began Operation Safe Streets in February 1997. Bernalillo County experienced significantly lower numbers of serious alcohol-involved crashes in 1997 compared to 1996, and had a lower number of alcohol-involved serious crashes than at any time since 1986.

NW NM Alcohol-Involved Serious Crashes

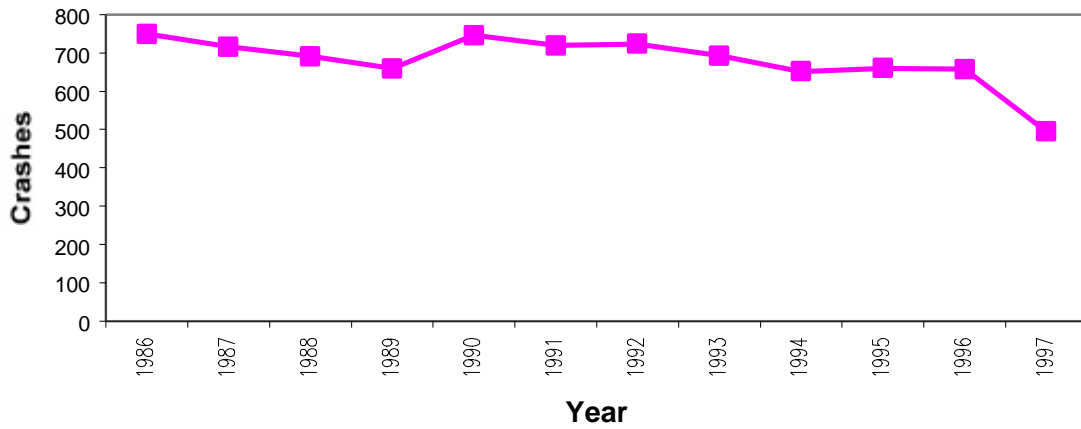


Chart 4

Bernalillo County Alcohol-Involved Serious Crashes

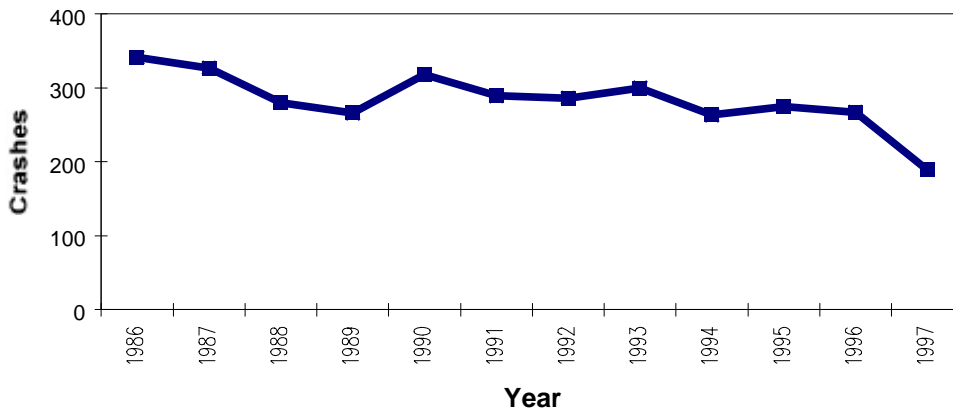


Chart 5

McKinley County has fought the alcohol-involved crash problem aggressively, closing drive-up liquor windows in 1989, lowering BAC limit for DWI to 0.08 in 1991, imposing excise taxes on liquor sales, and using money generated by the liquor excise tax to fund treatment programs for people arrested on alcohol-involved charges. The excise tax has been voted on by the people of McKinley County at least three times (November 1989, November 1993, and January 1996) passing by larger and larger margins. New Mexico has now followed McKinley County's lead, by closing drive-up liquor windows. While the closures may lower the number of alcohol-involved crashes, the value of treatment centers and strict enforcement cannot be overlooked.

McKinley and San Juan Counties Alcohol-Involved Serious Crashes

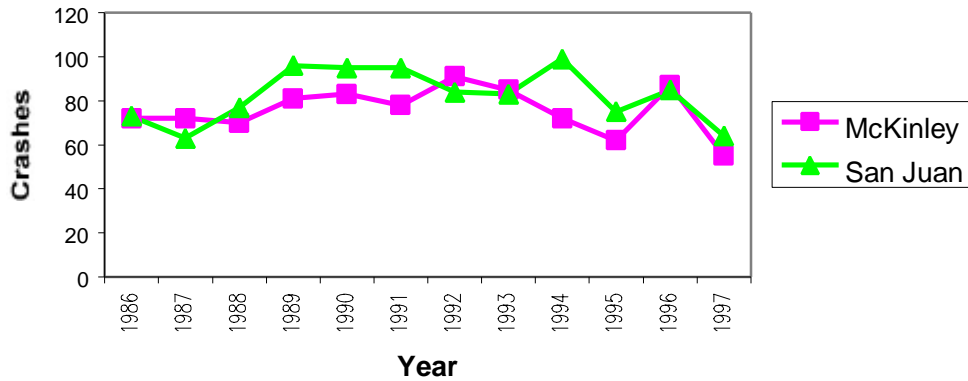


Chart 6

While improvements have been made in preventing alcohol-involved crashes, there is still much work to be done. Adoption of Operation Safe Streets by other communities, more treatment centers for alcohol offenders, and mandatory sentencing to treatment centers for alcohol offenders are all proven techniques for reducing the number of alcohol-involved crashes.

Northwest Quadrant	Northeast Quadrant	Southeast Quadrant	Southwest Quadrant
Bernalillo Cibola Los Alamos McKinley Rio Arriba San Juan Sandoval Santa Fe Taos Valencia	Colfax Guadalupe Harding Mora Quay San Miguel Torrance Union	Catron Doña Ana Grant Hidalgo Luna Sierra Socorro	Chaves Curry DeBaca Eddy Lea Lincoln Otero Roosevelt