

## McKinley County Crashes 1986 through 1997

McKinley County has had one of the highest rates of alcohol-involved crashes per 100,000 population of any county in New Mexico for many years. A series of newspaper articles from the Albuquerque Tribune (September 1988) and a nationally broadcast 20/20 report (August 1989) focused attention on the problems faced in McKinley County -- problems that many of the county's religious leaders had tried to combat in 1986. The publicity forced the county government and the county population to take action to combat the problem.

McKinley County began a series of actions to reduce its alcohol-involved crash problems in 1989. Enacted in February 1989, and ratified by voters in November 1989, a local-option closure of drive-up liquor windows and a 5% excise tax on liquor sales were just the first steps in a long-term struggle. Looking at the number of crashes, particularly the number of alcohol-involved crashes, from 1986 through 1997 (Chart 1 below) there was an increase in 1990, 1991, and 1992. Obviously, closure of the drive-up windows and the additional tax would not be the only action needed to cure the problem, nor was the problem going to go away quickly.

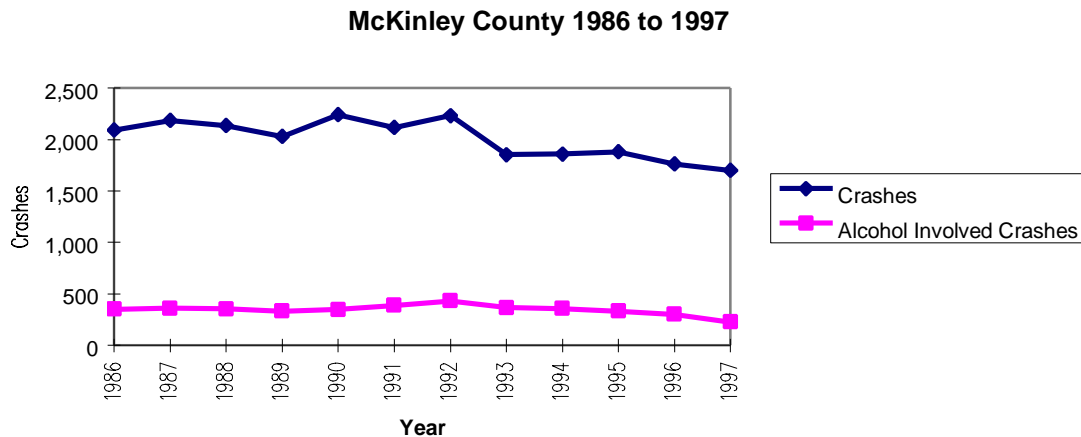
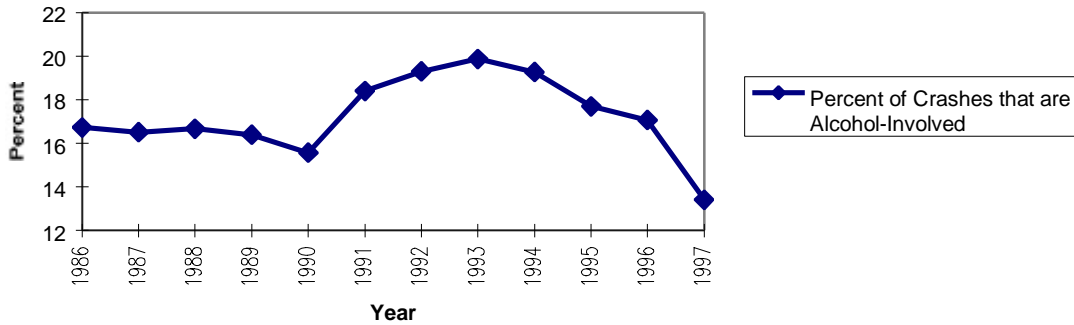


Chart 1

McKinley County used much of the money generated by the excise tax (60%) to fund an alcohol treatment and rehabilitation center. The Na'Nizhoozhi Center opened in November 1992, too late to have much impact on the number of crashes for 1992. The Na'Nizhoozhi Center was and is a long-term project to reduce the larger issue of alcohol abuse in McKinley County that has had important side effects in the number of alcohol-involved crashes. The county instituted mandatory treatment for DWI offenses. As can be seen from Chart 1, the number of alcohol-involved crashes was down sharply in 1993. The first rewards for the efforts expended. The number of alcohol-involved crashes has continued to decline every year since 1993. In 1995, McKinley County matched its lowest alcohol-involved crash count. In 1997, McKinley County, for the first time in twelve years, dropped below 300 alcohol-involved crashes, with only 228 alcohol-involved crashes.

The percentage of crashes that occur in McKinley County, that are alcohol-involved, is also declining. While 1993 was the first year of lower numbers of alcohol-involved crashes, it was a year later that the percentage also began to drop. The percentages, as shown in Chart 2 below, show the effectiveness of McKinley County's programs. The total number of crashes is dropping, but the number of alcohol-involved crashes is falling at a faster rate.

**Percent of Crashes that are Alcohol-Involved**

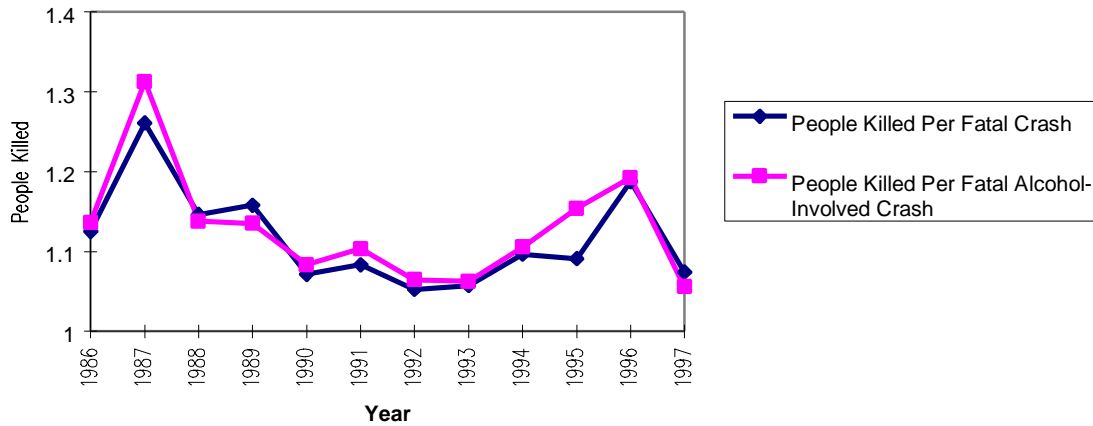


**Chart 2**

With the declining number of crashes, there have been fewer fatal crashes, and fewer crashes that resulted in serious injury (serious injury being defined as a fatality or an incapacitating injury). 1996 showed a distinct spike in both the number of fatal crashes and the number of serious injury crashes. The trends for the number of people seriously injured and killed follow the trends for serious crashes and fatal crashes, respectively, closely.

The number of people killed per alcohol-involved fatal crash is, generally, higher than the number of people killed per fatal crash in McKinley County. In only three of the last twelve years has the number of people killed per alcohol-involved fatal crash been lower than the number of people killed per fatal crash. Chart 3, below, illustrates the trends for people killed per fatal crash.

**People Killed Per Fatal Crash**



**Chart 3**

If we look at the numbers of people seriously injured per serious crash, both for alcohol-involved and for total, we see that, in seven of the past twelve years, fewer people are seriously injured per alcohol-involved serious crash than are seriously injured per serious crash as a total, as shown in Chart 4 below. There are likely many reasons for the difference, such as vehicle type, a person's willingness to ride with somebody who has been drinking, and the social habits of the people who drink and drive. None of the possible reasons lend themselves well to exploration in a limited study such as this one.

### Serious Injuries per Serious Crash

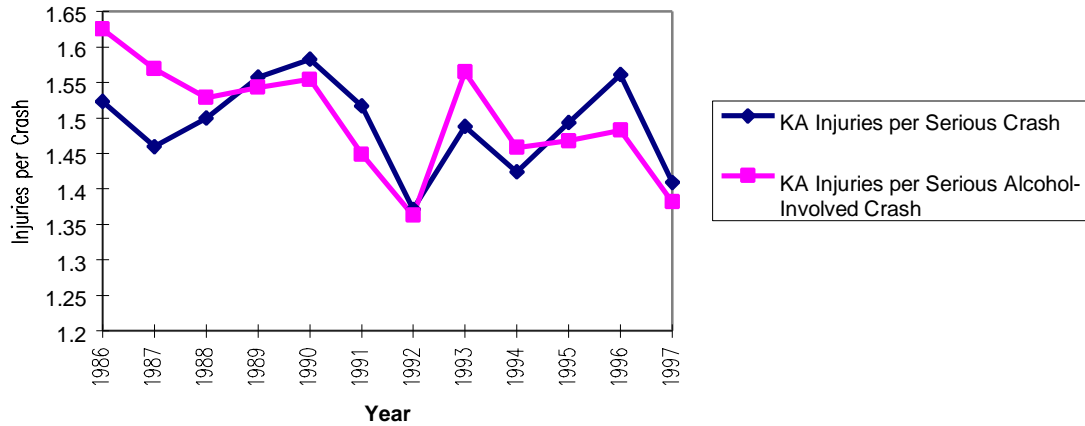


Chart 4

Despite a spike in 1996, the efforts of McKinley County have been successful in reducing the number of Alcohol-Involved crashes since 1993. McKinley County has not been willing to lessen its efforts, and has expanded some of its efforts, building on the successes that it has already had. The Na’Nizhoozhi Center has been expanded, to offer culturally aware treatment, and the mandatory rehabilitation program has been expanded from three days to twenty-one days in an attempt to break the cycle of alcohol addiction.

McKinley County has been so successful that other counties are studying the steps that McKinley County has taken, as guides in their own struggle with alcohol-abuse. Even the state of New Mexico has looked at McKinley County’s programs, as have other states, for a template on fighting alcohol abuse. Perhaps, with the state stepping more strongly into the fight against alcohol-involved crashes, McKinley County’s programs will become even more of a success.