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YOU & the LAW

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Chameleon carriers skirt regulators to avoid accountability

Large trucks are dangerous. They often weigh 20 to 30 times as much as a passenger vehicle and can cause significantly more damage in a crash.

In 69% of fatal crashes with large trucks in 2024, the trucks weighed more than 26,000 pounds.

In addition to the personal safety of the motoring public, those trucks carry millions of tons of hazardous materials over our roads and highways every year, including fuel oils, natural gas and other fossil fuels, and crude petroleum.

According to the most recent federal data, over 3,240 hazardous material releases occurred in 2022 from crashes involving these trucks.

Federal safety regulations for commercial trucking are key to protecting the public. The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) is the agency within the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) responsible for developing and enforcing regulations designed to reduce crashes, injuries and fatalities involving large trucks and buses.

It monitors regulations that cover the number of hours commercial truck drivers can be on the road, the frequency and length of mandatory breaks, required inspections of repairs and maintenance of equipment, safe operation of the vehicle, driver alcohol and drug testing, and handling of hazardous materials.



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A commercial trucking company that violates FMCSA safety regulations faces fines, downgraded safety ratings, and out-of-service orders that can effectively shut down the company's business operations.

Some trucking companies that rack up major safety violations try to avoid accountability by changing their corporate identity.

Those commercial trucking operators that change their corporate identity to avoid federal regulatory enforcement are called "chameleon carriers." They fly under the radar and make it difficult to keep roads safe.

A chameleon carrier files paperwork to register the trucking business under a new name and applies for a new DOT registration number for the same trucks and operators as the old company. Then it can operate without missing a day of business.

A *CBS News* analysis of millions of DOT records found that chameleon carriers are four times more likely to be involved in severe crashes than legitimate carriers.

One in every 100 trucking companies approved by the FMCSA since 2021 use the same trucks and facilities under a different company.

Thousands of these cases are brazen — the same person registers using the same physical address and phone number. Others simply make up addresses, phone numbers and email addresses to hide their identity.

It's challenging for federal regulators to distinguish legitimate companies applying for a registration from a chameleon carrier. The number of FMSCA workers is down 10% from 2015, while the number of active commercial carriers has increased by 31% during that same period. FMSCA has only about 350 investigators to oversee 700,000 carriers.

Legitimate carriers who keep their equipment maintained to safety standards and hire qualified drivers with good driving records are at a competitive disadvantage against chameleon carriers who skimp on equipment maintenance and upkeep, driver quality, and driver breaks and rest time, increasing the risk of a truck crash caused by driver fatigue.

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New guidelines to improve road safety for vulnerable users



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According to the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT) Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), almost 40,000 people were killed in fatal highway crashes in 2024. More than 8,000 of those victims were not in a motor vehicle, but were standing, walking, bicycling or travelling in a wheelchair along the roadway. This number includes road crew members working along the highway.

These non-motorists are referred to as vulnerable road users.

While some recent improvements have made roads safer, pedestrian deaths have increased 72% since 2009, according to "Dangerous by Design," a report from the nonprofit Smart Growth America.

The 2026 report ranks the deadliest states and metro areas for pedestrians. Louisiana ranked second in the nation for pedestrian deaths per 100,000 residents. Among metro areas, Baton Rouge ranked fifth, while the New Orleans-Metairie metro area was tied for ninth place with the San Bernadino, California, metro area.

In 2022, the FHWA approved new guidelines as part of the National Roadway Safety Strategy to help states address these deaths.

The guidelines assist states in developing a Vulnerable Road User Safety Assessment to identify areas of high risk and design improvements to make roads safer for non-motorists. The assessment is part of DOT's comprehensive approach to reaching zero fatalities on the nation's highways.

The assessment is based on demographic and performance-related data. States are required to work in consultation with local government and community groups that represent populations in high-risk areas.

Some practical measures to improve roadway safety for vulnerable users include separated bike lanes and walkways, curb extensions, crosswalk visibility upgrades, improved lighting and speed-calming road designs. States are encouraged to consider speed management and roadway engineering at sites where crash severity is driven by speed.

"Dangerous by Design" can be found at *www.smartgrowthamerica.org*.

Supplement teen driver education with free program

Auto crashes are the leading cause of death for U.S. teenagers. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 2,800 teens were killed and about 227,000 were injured in car wrecks in 2020. The risk is highest for newly licensed teens and teens driving with other teen or young adult passengers.

Other factors that increase the risk for teen accidents are underestimating or not recognizing dangerous situations, nighttime and weekend driving, not using seat belts, texting while driving, speeding, and drinking alcohol.

The death rate has been going down in recent years. In 2024, there were 370 fewer fatalities involving young drivers than the year before, a 6.6% decrease.

Parental involvement is key to keeping young drivers safe and helping them become good drivers. Driver education is not enough. Parents can help keep teen drivers safe by modelling safe driving habits, supervising practice driving, limiting night driving, restricting the number of passengers riding with their teen driver, and making the use of seat belts a condition of driving the car.

Parental involvement is key to keeping young drivers safe.

To supplement driver education and improve safety for teen drivers, the Governors Highway Safety Association and Ford Philanthropy worked with safety experts to develop Ford Driving Skills for Life (FDSL), a free comprehensive program for young drivers.

The program offers hands-on driving clinics where teens drive with professional instructors and participate in exercises designed to improve driver decision-making. It also offers an online driver training academy that includes videos, simulations, tips, quizzes and a printed certificate upon completion.

FDSL is available in all 50 states and Puerto Rico. Details of the safe driving clinics and online training can be found at *www.drivingskillsforlife.com*.

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