

Death toll on smart motorways hits new record

Figures for fatalities on controversial highways held back by transport chiefs

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The death toll on smart motorways has surged to a record, according to figures held back from publication by the Department of Transport (DfT).

There were 14 fatalities in 2019 on motorways where hard shoulders operate as full-time or part-time traffic lanes, according to data collected by the DfT but not published in its annual report on road casualties. There were 11 deaths in 2018 and five in 2017.

The figures are from last September's Stats-19 accident database, used by the DfT for its annual report, with input from RoadSafetyAnalysis, a consultancy. There is evidence that the true death toll in 2019 was in fact 15 because the death of a passenger in hospital seven weeks after a crash on a smart motorway was not counted.

The toll is rising faster than the network is expanding. The number of deaths per mile of smart motorway has risen from one every 43 miles in 2016 to one every 17 miles in 2019.

Grant Shapps, the transport secretary, was already under pressure from South Yorkshire's police and crime commissioner to scrap the 375-mile network of smart motorways after another serious smash on the M1. A coroner investigating the death of [Nargis Begum](#), 62, a grandmother, has referred Highways England to the Crown Prosecution Service to consider whether corporate manslaughter charges should be brought.

The emergence of the figures has led the families of victims to redouble campaigning efforts.

[Claire Mercer](#), whose husband, Jason, 44, died on a stretch of the M1 near Sheffield with no hard shoulder in June 2019, said: "It's 14 people who didn't come home, which is exactly what happened with my husband. People are starting to realise the emergency of it. Smart motorways need to be scrapped. We need the hard shoulder back — it is the only way that we will stop this dangerous situation. All motorways need a hard shoulder all of the time."

Sally Jacobs, 83, whose husband, Derek, was killed on the M1 south of Sheffield in March 2019, when problems with a tyre forced him to stop his van, said: "People do not want these smart motorways, they want a hard shoulder. Only the government and Highways England want it because of the cost."

Her husband's van was hit by a red Ford Ka, and Charles Scripps, 78, from Northampton, who was a passenger in the Ka, died in hospital on May 9, seven weeks later. His death is not recorded on the official accident databases.

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Edmund King, AA president, who warned ministers about the risks five years ago, said: "Tragically these devastating new figures reflect our worst fears. More and more people are dying on 'smart motorways'.

"The clamour for change has been getting louder, as officials sat on these figures, with coroners and police commissioners now joining our campaign alongside former transport ministers pushing for change."

As recently as January 25, Baroness Vere of Norbiton, the roads minister, told parliament that "the most recent data on fatalities published is for 2017 and 2018".

She cited figures for motorways that use hard shoulders full time (all-lane running) and part-time (with a dynamic hard shoulder), but also included a third category called “controlled motorways”, which have conventional hard shoulders and variable speed limits. Eight people died on that third category of roads in 2018, and five in 2019.

A DfT “stocktake” of the safety performance of smart motorways concluded last March that in three out of four years from 2015-18, the share of fatalities occurring on all lane running and dynamic hard shoulder motorways was lower than the share of traffic carried, although serious casualties were higher than the share of traffic.

The risk of a live lane collision between a moving vehicle and a stopped vehicle is greater on these motorways, but the risk of a collision between two or more moving vehicles is lower.

Earlier this month Shapps discussed why he had decided not to scrap them. “A lot of people say, ‘Just undo it’, and I have looked at that. It would require the equivalent land for 700 Wembley stadium-sized football pitches to somehow undo it all. We would have to buy people’s homes and destroy acres of green belt. I do not see that there is a route through to simply undoing it. We have to make what is there safe.”

Highways England is to launch a publicity campaign in March to explain basic safety for smart motorways amid evidence of confusion among drivers. It said: “At the transport secretary’s request, we are currently preparing a progress report against his evidence stocktake and action plan which will include analysis of latest safety data.”

The DfT said: “Since taking office, the transport secretary has committed £500m to smart motorways safety improvements and has recently pressed Highways England to further accelerate work. The safety and peace of mind of drivers and passengers using these routes remains our priority.”