

Recreational Vehicles & Safety Regulations

Executive Summary

A potential increase of recreational vehicle (RV) use during the pandemic has raised some safety concerns over how drivers should be prepared. While Missouri does not have specific regulations for RV driver's licensing requirements, some states mandate requirements, often based on vehicle weight. The overall effectiveness of these requirements is relatively unexplored.

Highlights

- Thirteen states have licensing requirements for drivers of large vehicles, generally over 26,000 lbs, which can apply to some larger RVs
- Beyond licensing, other potential safety requirements for trailers include safety chains, brake, and lighting requirements.

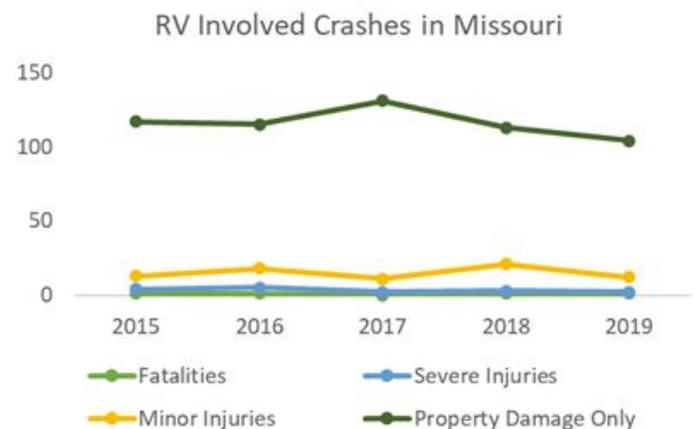
Limitations

- There is a lack of research on the effectiveness of licensing requirements for promoting safety for RV drivers

Research Background

RV Usage and Safety

Recreational vehicles (RVs) refer to campers, either trailers or self-motorized (motorhomes). With calls for physical distancing during the pandemic, some travelers have opted for RV camping. In Missouri, state parks saw a 17% increase in campers in June 2020 compared to June 2019, and the RV Industry Association reported a 10% increase in RV shipments in June 2020 versus June 2019.¹ The possibility of an increase in new RV drivers raises potential safety concerns as these vehicles can be twice as long and twice as heavy as typical passenger vehicles. Based on data from the Missouri Statewide Traffic Accident Records System from 2015-2019, RV crashes (not including trailers) in Missouri resulted in an average of 1 fatal crash/year, 3 severe injury crashes/year, 15 minor injuries per year, and 116 crashes/year with property damage only.² Calculating average collisions per miles driven is challenging due to discrepancies in which vehicles are included as RVs in national databases (which may include snowmobiles and all-terrain vehicles).



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Licensing Requirements

Some states have driver requirements that can apply to RV drivers.³ At least 8 states require a special license for driving vehicles greater than 26,000 lbs. An additional 5 states require commercial driver's licenses (CDLs) for vehicles over 26,000 lbs. New York requires a recreational vehicle endorsement (a code printed on license to indicate extra privileges) for vehicles (or combined total weight) over 26,000 lbs, and Michigan requires an endorsement for towing a 5th wheel plus a trailer. Wisconsin and California require a CDL based on length (over 40-45 ft) rather than weight.³ In Missouri, the maximum length for a single vehicle is 45 ft.⁴ Many RVs fall below this weight and length. Class A motorhomes, the largest motorhomes, range from 13,000-30,000 lbs and can potentially exceed 40 ft in length. The effectiveness of licensing requirements for RVs in promoting safety or educating drivers is unclear. A 1996 study in California evaluating impacts of major changes in CDL requirements did not find that these changes significantly changed fatalities or injuries involving heavy vehicles.⁵

Other Safety Requirements

States may also have specific safety requirements for trailers. An analysis of trailer towing crashes in 2011 identified chains, lighting, and brakes as the most likely parts to fail.⁶ In Missouri, safety chains are generally required with a few exceptions. Trailers must have rear tail lights, and if visible signals cannot be given by hand or with certain tail dimensions, additional brake and turn signals may be required. Trailer brakes are not required except for trailers above 3,000 lbs hauling hazardous material and trailers coupled with fifth wheel and kingpin.⁴ Most states require trailer brakes depending on vehicle weight or ability to stop in a given distance.⁷ Missouri also has no restrictions on movements in a trailer or camper while in motion, and no safety belt requirement for drivers or passengers above 21 years old.⁴ While safety belts generally reduce risk of major injuries in crashes, there is limited data specific to RVs.⁸

References

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