

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2013

# Drowsy drivers take toll on roads

## Hundreds of crashes each year in Ohio blamed on sleepiness.

By **Cornelius Frolik**  
Staff Writer

A driver in Clayton fell asleep at the wheel and crashed into a church.

A Miami University student fell asleep while driving, resulting in a vehicle roll-over.

A bus driver in Dayton reportedly fell asleep while driving and the bus smashed into the side of a downtown

building.

More than one in 25 Americans admit to falling asleep recently while driving, and drowsy driving is one of the leading causes of injury crashes in Ohio, according to data analyzed by the Dayton Daily News.

Drowsy driving has contributed to thousands of crashes in the state, and it can be nearly as dangerous as driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol, experts said.

"Driving while fatigued is dangerous because it slows reaction time, impairs vision and causes lapses in judgment, similar to driving drunk," said Peter Kissinger, president and CEO of the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

"We know that people can't reliably predict when they are going to fall asleep, and a very fatigued driver may fall asleep for several seconds without even realizing it."

More than one in four motorists say they have been so tired while driving in the past month that they had troubling keeping their eyes open, according to research released this month from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety.

Meanwhile, about 4 percent of Americans said they drifted off to sleep while behind the wheel in the previous month, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

### Drifting off

On Jan. 6, 2009, four Miami University students were hospitalized after the van they were riding in flipped over near Erie, Pa., according to court documents. The students were members of the university's Glee Club, and they were traveling from Cleveland to Buffalo, N.Y., as part of their winter tour.

But about 90 minutes into the trip, Sean Barry — the driver and a Glee Club member — fell asleep and drifted into the median, court documents show.

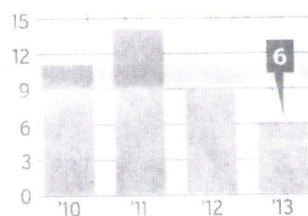
Barry awoke and jerked the wheel, causing the vehicle to swerve to the right. The van struck several road signs before rolling over and ending up on its roof.

Multiple passengers were injured. Barry was cited for driving too fast for road conditions and he was later sued for negligence by at least one passenger. The suit resulted in a settlement.

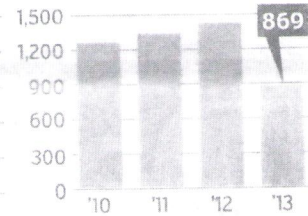
## Asleep at the wheel

Ohio has seen many crashes involving drivers who were fatigued, fell asleep or fainted.

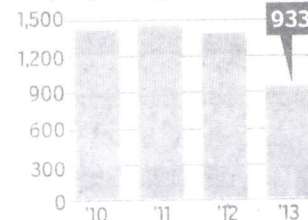
Number of fatalities



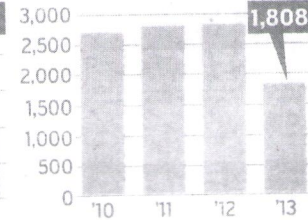
Number of injuries



Property damage



Totals



Note: Data for 2013 is incomplete  
Source: Ohio Department of Public Safety

STEVE LOPEZ/STAFF

About 1,415 injury crashes last year in Ohio were attributed to drivers falling asleep, being tired or fainting, according to the Ohio Department of Public Safety. That was up 7 percent from 2011 and up 13 percent from 2010. Since 2010, the state has had 34 fatal crashes chalked up to sleepiness or fainting.

### Six fatal accidents

So far this year, there have been six fatal crashes and 869 injury crashes in Ohio attributed to fatigue, falling asleep or fainting, the state said. And that covers only crashes where the causes were determined.

Bodily harm is not the only consequence of drowsy driving.

At about 1:20 a.m. Tuesday, a driver with the Greater Dayton Regional Transit Authority fell asleep while driving 25 mph on South Ludlow Street, a traffic report states. The 64-year-old driver lost control of the bus and it crashed into a FedEx Office. The driver and the lone passenger on the bus were not injured.

In 2012, there were 1,385 crashes in Ohio in which drowsy drivers caused property damage, and often the damage is extensive.

On Jan. 18, 2012, John Hatmaker, 59, of Englewood, fell asleep behind the wheel and crashed into Happy Corner Church of the Brethren in the 7000 block of N. Union Road in Clayton.

The crash caused more than \$100,000 in damage to the church's glass entry doors, vestibule ceiling, pews and other property, a police report shows.

Hatmaker said he works third shift, and for years he has struggled with fatigue and sleepiness. He said in 2006 he was involved in another crash when he fell asleep while driving home from work.

"I never fully adjusted to working nights and sleeping days," he said. "I was always tired."

On the day of his most recent crash, Hatmaker said, he helped his parents instead of resting, a decision that disrupted his normal sleep schedule. He said he twice fell asleep while driving to work. The first time, he snapped out of it quickly and turned up his radio to try to perk up.

The second time ended in destruction.

Hatmaker said he last remembers coming to a stop at a four-way intersection.

He woke up after his car had smashed into the church and plowed through many pews. He said he was disoriented and he panicked and fled. He called police shortly afterward to report the accident.

Hatmaker said a doctor later diagnosed him with a sleeping disorder, and he received treatment for his condition. He said he stopped driving completely after the crash.

Hatmaker said he is still paying the financial consequences of not acting sooner to address his sleep problems.

### **Similar to drunk driving**

Sleep deprivation increases the risk for drowsy driving, and motorists who have been awake for 18 hours have the cognitive impairment of someone who has a blood alcohol level of 0.05 percent, according to data from the CDC.

After 24 hours without sleep, impairment is about the same as having a blood alcohol content of 0.10 percent, which is above the legal driving limit of 0.08 percent.

Motorists need to recognize the signs that they are too weary to be on the road, said Cindy Antrican, public affairs manager for AAA Miami Valley.

Warning signs include struggling to focus or having heavy eyelids. Drowsy drivers often yawn constantly, miss traffic signs and highway exits or drift in and out of lanes. Tired drivers often are unable to recall the last few miles traveled and have disconnected or wandering thoughts.

Drivers should schedule a break from driving every couple of hours or every 100 miles, AAA suggests. They should also avoid heavy foods and medication that can cause drowsiness.