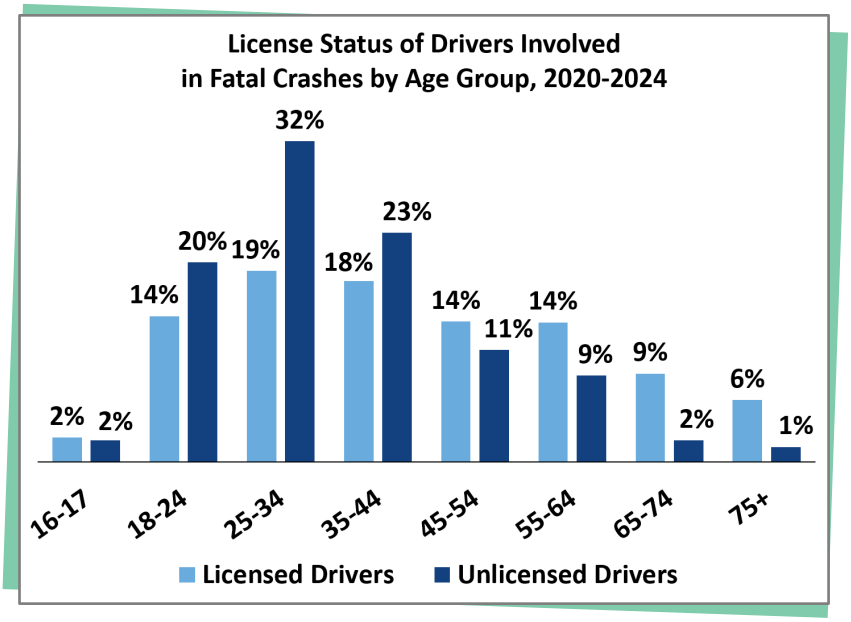
Unlicensed Drivers on Washington Roads

Unlicensed drivers represent a population of motorists who either lack a license to operate a vehicle, have let an existing license expire, or have had their license suspended or revoked. From 2020 through 2024, there were 3,260 fatal crashes involving a motor vehicle, which resulted in 3,537 fatalities. These fatal crashes involved a total of 4,966 drivers, one in six (or 15%) of whom were unlicensed[1].

I care, because 808 lives were lost in fatal crashes involving an unlicensed driver on Washington roadways from 2020 through 2024.



Did you know?

From 2020 through 2024:

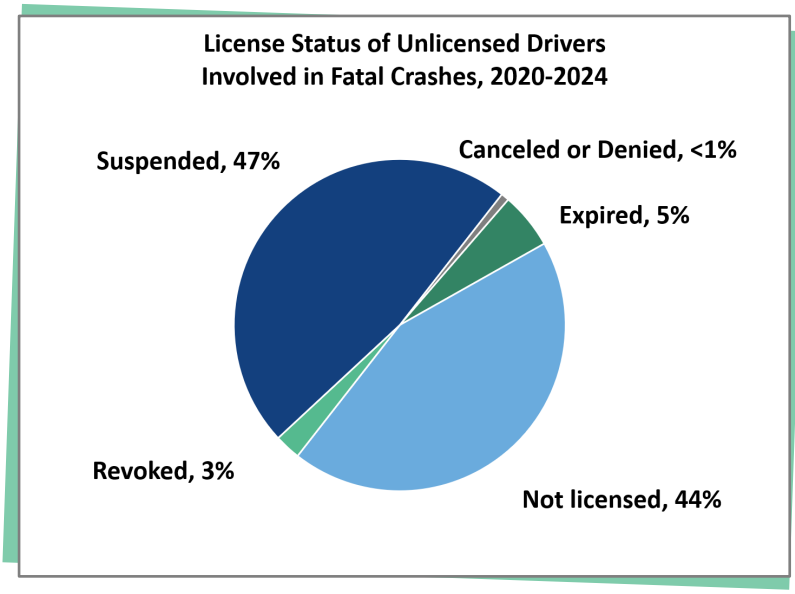
- Most unlicensed drivers were relatively young. One in five (or 20%) were ages18-24, and one in three (or 32%) were ages 25-34[1].
- Four percent of drivers in Washington have had their license suspended, revoked or canceled.
- More than half (or 54%) of unlicensed drivers involved in a fatal crash were under the age of 35.
- Most (or 82%) unlicensed drivers involved in a fatal crash did not have valid liability insurance.
- More unlicensed drivers were involved in multi-vehicle fatal crashes (55%) than single-vehicle fatal crashes (45%).

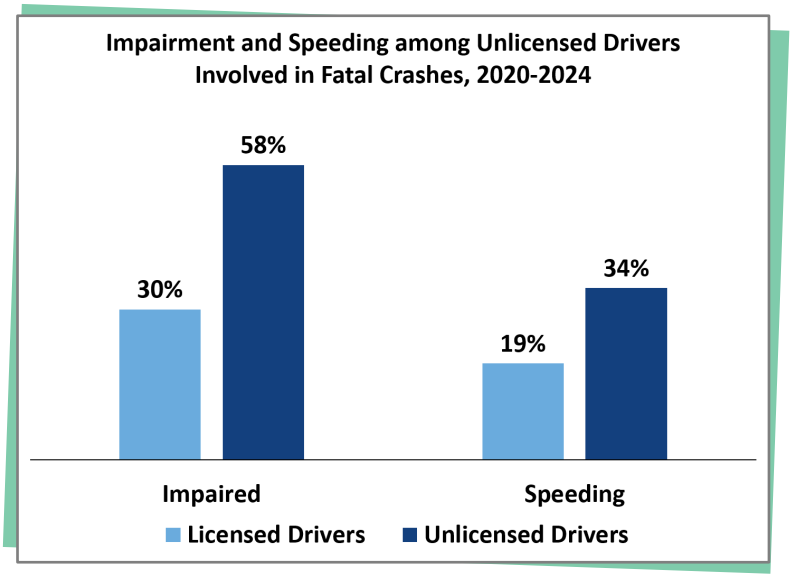
Half (or 47%) of unlicensed drivers involved in a fatal crash were operating a vehicle with a suspended license[1]. A license can be suspended if a driver accumulates too many traffic violations (i.e., habitual traffic offender) or is convicted of a serious traffic violation such as driving while impaired or driving recklessly[2]. This means that most unlicensed drivers involved in a fatal crash had previous encounters with law enforcement and were prohibited from operating a vehicle. Nearly half (or 44%) of unlicensed drivers were not licensed at all, and nearly one in ten (or 9%) had either an expired, canceled, or revoked license[1].

(See chart top of next page)

Impaired driving and speeding

was observed more often among unlicensed drivers involved in a fatal crash than among licensed drivers. Twice as many unlicensed drivers than licensed drivers were impaired by alcohol or drugs at the time of the fatal crash (58%)[1]. Similarly, nearly twice as many unlicensed drivers than licensed drivers were speeding at the time of the fatal crash (34%).





Two-thirds (or 68%) of unlicensed drivers were impaired, speeding or both at the time of the fatal crash[1]. One in three (34%) unlicensed drivers were only impaired at the time of the fatal crash, while one in ten (10%) were only speeding. One in four (24%) unlicensed drivers were both impaired *and* speeding at the time of the fatal crash.

(See chart top of next page)

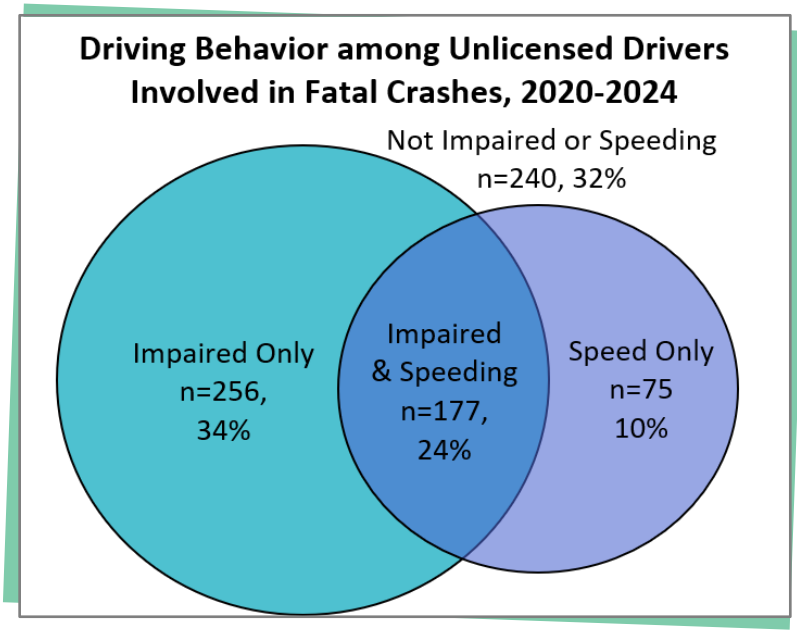
Did you know?

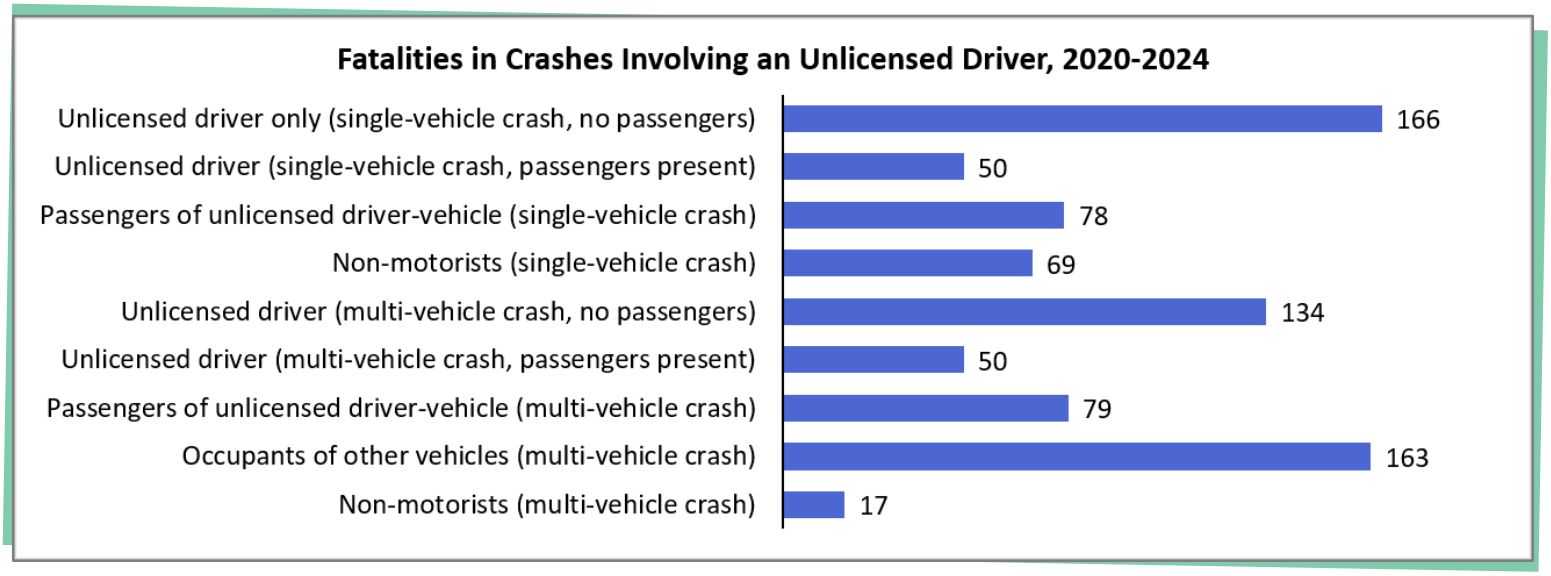
From 2020 through 2024:

- About one out of every 10 fatal crashes were initiated* by an unlicensed driver.
- One in three (or 33%) unlicensed drivers involved in a fatal crash had a previous speeding conviction in the past five years[1] (compared to one in four (or 25%) licensed drivers).
- One in four (or 27%) unlicensed drivers involved in a fatal crash had been in a previous crash in the past five years (compared to one in four (or 21%) licensed drivers).
- One in five (20%) unlicensed drivers involved in a fatal crash had a previous impaired driving conviction in the past five years (compared to three percent of licensed drivers).

* A driver was deemed to have initiated the crash when they were the only driver in a crash with contributing circumstances reported (excluding 'none', 'other', and missing circumstances

From 2020 through 2024 there was on average, 15.5 fatalities per week from crashes involving an unlicensed driver. In single-vehicle crashes where no passengers were present, 166 unlicensed drivers were fatally injured. In single-vehicle crashes where an unlicensed driver had passengers in their vehicle, 78 passengers were fatally injured. In multi-vehicle crashes involving an unlicensed driver, 168 occupants of other vehicles in the crash were fatally injured. In crashes involving an unlicensed driver, 86 non-motorists were fatally injured. In fatal multi-vehicle crashes where an unlicensed driver was involved, unlicensed drivers initiated* 50 percent of crashes, while licensed drivers initiated* 22 percent of crashes.





Data Sources

[1] Drivers Involved in Fatal Crashes Dashboard

[2] Washington Department of Licensing

For more information, please visit the WTSC Data Dashboards at https://wtsc.wa.gov/ dashboards/, or contact the WTSC Research and Data Division at (360) 725-9860.

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