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⦿ Roads in Denton County and Collin County among the safest in Texas

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Suburbanites sitting in traffic north of Dallas can take solace in one thing: At least they're safe.

A review of Texas Department of Transportation records indicates that Denton County and Collin County had the two lowest motor vehicle fatality rates in 2011 among Texas counties with more than 50,000 people.

Denton County had 4.5 fatalities per 100,000 residents. Collin County was right behind with 5 per 100,000. The state average was about 12.2 per 100,000.

That may surprise some, considering the crowded, high-speed freeways that the counties have developed around. But those freeways may actually be the reason, said Natalie Bettger, a senior program manager in the North Central Texas Council of Governments safety working group.

Freeways allow for higher speeds than urban streets, Bettger said, but they are divided and have very few head-on collisions. They also usually have good lighting, she said.

The numbers seem to back that up. All five of Texas' safest counties are in suburban areas. No. 3 Fort Bend is north of Houston, No. 4 Williamson is north of Travis County, and No. 5 Brazoria is south of Houston.

Rural areas — with less lighting and narrow, undivided streets — seem to be the most dangerous. The 50 largest metropolitan areas in the United States average 8.2 fatalities per 100,000 people. Rural areas bring the national average up to 11.1 per 100,000, according to a report by the Center for Disease Control.

Lloyd Neal, transportation engineering manager for the city of Plano, said the massive growth of Collin County and Denton County may also provide an advantage. Rising populations have forced governments to build to get ahead of that growth, he said, so there is often infrastructure in place for larger future populations.

"I am expecting that as the area fills in, those rates will go up," he said.

Local government officials in the areas also say they work hard to keep their roads safe. Transportation researchers list "three E's" in preventing traffic fatalities — enforcement, engineering and education.

Relatively low crime rates in the counties allow local police to devote energy on enforcement. The Denton Police Department, for instance, has 10 officers who focus solely on traffic infractions. During the daytime, they look out for speeders. At night, they focus on intoxicated driving, Officer Ryan Grelle said.

"Their main focus is writing tickets for safety reasons," Grelle said.

The areas' growing economies allow city engineering departments to emphasize traffic safety. Each year, Plano city staff reviews the 20 streets and intersections in the city that have the most accidents. If turn lanes, better signage or medians can be added, those projects are often added to the cities capital improvement projects, Neal said.

And the North Central Texas Council of Governments works with all local governments on safety issues. Recently, the organization has begun implementing programs aimed at keeping drivers from entering freeways in the wrong direction and adding more lighting to dangerous streets.

Other areas in North Texas also fared well on the list. Dallas County averaged 7.2 fatalities per 100,000 people — eighth in the state and lower than the counties home to Houston, Austin and San Antonio. Tarrant County had 8.2 per 100,000, which was 13th. There were 63 counties in Texas with more than 50,000 people in 2011.

