

States Hope to Make One of the Dirtiest, Deadliest Jobs a Little Safer

Garbage workers are killed on the job more often than police or firefighters.

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Trash collectors often can't see when a car is headed their way and not slowing down.

Collecting trash is one of the most dangerous jobs in the country. In fact, garbage workers are far more likely to die on the job than police officers or professional firefighters.

One of the biggest dangers they face is being hit by other drivers swerving to pass the trucks along their routes. That's why lawmakers in 16 states have passed "Slow Down to Get Around" laws in recent years.

The details vary, but most of the laws increase penalties for drivers who hit trash workers. In many cases, the laws also require drivers to treat trash trucks the same way they would treat emergency vehicles: by changing lanes or traveling at 10 to 15 mph slower than the posted speed limit.

The legislative push comes at a time when fatality rates for trash workers are on the rise: They hit their highest point in a decade in 2015, the last year for which [federal data](#) is available. Not all of those on-the-job deaths were caused by traffic crashes, but some say that risk is rising because of distracted driving.

"The majority of the incidents are when a worker is behind a truck and a driver is distracted," says David Biderman, executive director of the Solid Waste Association of North America (SWANA) who has been tracking the issue for a decade. "Usually, it's a cell phone, but it can also be reaching for a soda or yelling at the kids."

Garbage trucks often operate in residential neighborhoods in the morning when people are rushing to get to work or school and the sun is still low in the sky, making it harder for drivers to see. Meanwhile, the trash collectors are behind their trucks, with their backs to traffic. They can't see when a car is headed their way and not slowing down.

Michigan was the first state to pass a Slow Down to Get Around law in 2009. Its law lets prosecutors bring felony charges against drivers who kill or injure people working around garbage trucks and other roadside vehicles. The other states that have passed similar laws are Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Virginia, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

It's tough to assess how much of an effect Michigan's law -- or those that followed -- has had on fatality rates because many other factors could also influence the results, says Biderman. The number of U.S. traffic deaths overall, for example, appears to have increased the last two years, as the economy improved and Americans began driving more.

Industry groups like SWANA, along with cities and trash-hauling companies, have also tried to make the public more aware of the dangers facing garbage and recycling workers. For nearly a decade, they've used social media, truck decals, rallies and [public service announcements](#) to promote the message. Fairfax County, Va., even brought a trash truck covered with a Slow Down to Get Around logo to [the funeral of a trash worker](#) in a nearby Maryland county who was struck on the job.

People are generally receptive to slowing down for trash workers, Biderman says, but passing new state laws can be a tougher sell. In a few states, he says, proposals stalled because lawmakers were concerned that once they added provisions for garbage workers, accommodations would have to be made for other types of workers, like tow truck operators or utility workers.

"They're concerned about the slippery slope," he says. "Frankly, I'm shocked that that would be a reason not to enact legislation, because we're going to have to protect more people."

Biderman urges lawmakers to consider the alternatives.

"Unfortunately, one of the great catalysts for this legislation is when a worker gets struck and killed by a driver," he says. It's hard for lawmakers to vote against a widow who just lost her husband, testifying in favor of a Slow Down to Get Around bill. "What I say when I talk to state legislators is: Let's not wait for that horrible thing to happen."



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