

The trucking industry represents a growing concern for advocates of road safety. According to the National Safety Council, the rate of large truck-involved fatal collisions increased 43% between 2010 and 2019, making up 10% of all motor vehicles involved in fatal collisions.¹ One might wonder what caused this a dramatic spike in such fatal collisions. These fatalities increased in tandem with federal deregulation of the trucking industry, a bipartisan effort spanning decades.

Deregulation began under President Jimmy Carter. President Carter signed the Motor Carrier Act of 1980 into law, a policy that ended federal oversight of price-setting, resulting in lower wages for truckers, bankruptcies among trucking companies, and exorbitant profits for the retailers that “ruthlessly rationalize their supply chains.”² Now, as people turn to online shopping to purchase their goods, a need to meet consumer demand and facilitate economic growth motivate policymakers to continue this heritage of federal deregulation.

In August 2019, Transportation Secretary Elaine Chao announced the implementation of new, lax requirements. This bureaucratic deregulation allowed truckers to count time on-duty as part of their 30-minute breaks, while also enabling them to break up their required 10-hour daily break into two separate breaks. This policy also allowed truckers to extend their daily driving limit from 12 to 14 hours, or even to extend them by an additional two hours in cases of “adverse” conditions.³ Now, facing supply chain issues and a labor shortage in the trucking industry, the U.S. Department of Transportation’s Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration proposed a pilot program to allow motorists aged 18-20 years to operate commercial motor vehicles – including large trucks like tractor-trailers – in interstate travel.⁴ The Center for Disease Control reports that teenage drivers are roughly three times to be involved in a fatal crash as older, more experienced motorists.⁵ Should the federal government launch this pilot program, the rate of fatal large truck-involved collisions will surely continue to balloon, trading human lives for economic expediency.

One of the thousands of fatal collisions involving a tractor-trailer in 2021 resulted in the passing of a colleague and friend of mine. Mckenna Winnie, a MPP/MPH graduate student at the Rutgers Bloustein School, was killed by a tractor-trailer mere months before completing her degree program and embarking on what would have been an undoubtedly bright future.⁶

¹ <https://injuryfacts.nsc.org/motor-vehicle/road-users/large-trucks/>

² <https://www.businessinsider.com/truck-driver-pay-motor-carrier-act-retail-2020-7>

³ <https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/457411-trump-administration-takes-step-to-relax-truck-driver-time>

⁴ <https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/newsroom/fmcsa-proposes-new-under-21-commercial-driver-pilot-program>

⁵ https://www.cdc.gov/transportationsafety/teen_drivers/teendrivrs_factsheet.html

⁶ <https://dailyvoice.com/new-jersey/saddlebrook/news/beloved-saddle-brook-woman-who-survived-brain-tumor-23-killed-in-crash/817941/>

The federal policy changes that deregulated the trucking industry led to the loss of thousands of lives per year on roads across the United States. Nevertheless, advocates for road safety can reverse these mistakes. The implementation of extensive federal oversight of the trucking industry, as well as strict regulation of the retail giants that make the most use of trucking services, would save countless lives and preventing needless tragedies like the devastating loss experienced by Mckenna's family and friends.