

Chapter 10

NPTS Highway Accident Data

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- Approximately two-thirds of all highway motor vehicle accidents result in property damage only (PDO).
- Of these property damage only accidents, a police report is filed in three-quarters of the cases. The remaining quarter are considered “unreported” accidents. Most states have threshold amounts of damage before a police report is required.
- In terms of the characteristics of unreported accidents, about 77% involve two or more vehicles. Only 23% are single-vehicle accidents.

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Chapter 10 NPTS Highway Accident Data

THIS chapter presents information on highway accidents that occurred during the five-year period prior to the 1990 NPTS survey. The questions in the questionnaire only refer to the most recent accident that occurred in the last 5 years. Furthermore, highway accidents in the 1990 NPTS refer only to those that involved a motor vehicle on a public highway or road, resulting in property damage and/or personal injury. Motor vehicle accidents in a parking lot, in a driveway, on a private road, or in a foreign country were excluded from the survey. Therefore, readers should be cautious when interpreting data presented in this chapter. Survey results presented in this chapter by no means represent an overall picture of all motor vehicle accidents during any time period. Consequently, one should not compare data presented in this chapter with those published in other sources.

Specifically, the emphasis of this chapter is on the estimated differences between accidents for which police reports were filed and those for which no police reports were filed. A reported-accident in this survey is one for which the respondent thinks that a police report has been filed. Every state has laws requiring accidents involving serious bodily injury or fatality to be reported, but the thresholds for reporting property damage only (PDO) accidents vary from state to state.

Accident Questions in NPTS

The accident questions were added to the NPTS survey in an effort to obtain data on the number and characteristics of accidents for which no police report was filed. Most commonly, these are PDO accidents with damage below \$500. The U. S. Department of Transportation (DOT) is interested in unreported accidents because they are part of the measures of

safety for the highway system, the vehicle and the driver. While there are other data systems that provide information on fatal accidents and other reported highway crashes, there was no source of national data on the phenomenon of unreported accidents. These accidents certainly have economic and social costs associated with them, and it was important to attempt to define their scope and nature. Accordingly, questions on these unreported accidents were included as part of the 1990 NPTS.

Caveats Regarding NPTS Highway Accident Data

The reader should be aware of the fact that highway crash data reported in this chapter are based on information collected from a total of 6,830 accidents. Of these, respondents stated that a police report was filed in 5,400 accidents, and no police report was filed in the remaining 1,430 accidents. Throughout this chapter, tables on “unreported” accidents are based on this sample of 1,430 accidents.

Due to the small sample size, there are several concerns about the quality of the NPTS accident data. These concerns are reflected in the following aspects:

- A relatively small proportion of respondents (14 percent) reported being the driver in the most recent highway crash during the past five years.
- It appears that many of the drivers did not know whether a police report was filed. This might happen under the circumstance when the police may have been called to the scene, but did not file a report because the accident took place on private property. Or, one of the parties may have called the police later and a report was filed.

- The ratio of reported to unreported accidents was greater than initially expected. There was almost a 4 to 1 ratio of reported to unreported accidents. According to DOT's experience, this ratio was expected to be closer to 2 to 1.
- Although unreported accidents took place under adverse road conditions, they did not do so to the degree expected by the DOT.

General Estimates System Data

Representative statistics on police-reported motor vehicle crashes are published by DOT's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) in its annual publication General Estimates System. From 1988 to 1990, the number of police-reported crashes dropped by 6 percent, from 6,877 thousand crashes in 1988 to 6,462 thousand in 1990. Crashes resulting in severe or fatal injuries declined by 8 percent during the period, though the number of minor or moderate injury crashes remained the same.¹ Motor vehicle crashes involving more than one vehicle outnumbered single-vehicle crashes by more than two to one (Table 10.1).

NPTS Accident Summary

Based on data collected in the NPTS, the majority of households were not involved in any motor-vehicle accidents during the five-year period prior to the 1990 NPTS survey. More than 80 percent of the accidents involved automobiles. Out of the 32 million accidents estimated from the survey, 78 percent were reported and 21 percent were unreported. The difference between reported and unreported accidents in terms of the type of vehicle involved in the accident is negligible.

Driver Characteristics

More than half of the accidents involved male drivers — 54 percent of reported accidents and 52 percent of unreported accidents. There was no difference between male drivers and female drivers in reporting accidents. Drivers between the ages of 20 and 29 were involved in more accidents than drivers in other age groups. This is true for both male and female drivers.

Accident Severity

Single-vehicle accidents were more likely to be unreported than multiple-vehicle accidents. More than three quarters of the accidents did not result in any injury or fatality. The proportion of unreported accidents that resulted in no injury was significantly greater than that of police-reported accidents. As expected, police-reported accidents resulted in a larger proportion of more serious injuries than did unreported accidents. Ninety-two percent of unreported accidents resulted in property damage only.

¹ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, General Estimates System, 1990, DOT HS 807 781, U.S. Department of Transportation, Washington, D.C. November 1991.

TABLE 10.1

**MOTOR VEHICLE CRASHES BY CRASH TYPE AND CRASH SEVERITY
(THOUSANDS)**

Crash Type	Property Damage Only	Minor or Moderate Injury	Severe or Fatal Injury	TOTAL
Single Vehicle	1,235 (60%)	631 (31%)	176 (9%)	2,043 (100%)
Multi-Vehicle	3,020 (68%)	1,194 (27%)	205 (5%)	4,419 (100%)
TOTAL	4,255 (66%)	1,825 (28%)	382 (6%)	6,462 (100%)

Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, *General Estimates System, 1990*, DOT HS 807 781. U.S. Department of Transportation, Washington, D.C. November 1991.

During the five-year period prior to the 1990 NPTS survey, slightly more than half of accidents involved male drivers — 53.6% for reported accidents and 52.4% for unreported ones. The distributions of accidents by driver's sex were relatively similar in both reported and unreported accidents indicating

that there was no difference in the type of accidents between male and female drivers. Partially because drivers in the age group 20 to 29 drove more compared to other age groups, they were more likely to be involved in highway crashes than any other age group.

TABLE 10.2

COMPARISON OF REPORTED ACCIDENTS AND UNREPORTED ACCIDENTS BY DRIVER'S AGE AND SEX
1990 NPTS

Driver's Age	Reported Accident			Unreported Accident		
	Male	Female	TOTAL	Male	Female	TOTAL
16-19	830,211 (6.2%)	694,417 (6.0%)	1,524,628 (6.1%)	219,250 (6.3%)	286,830 (9.0%)	506,080 (7.6%)
20-29	4,356,812 (32.6%)	3,567,702 (30.9%)	7,924,513 (31.8%)	1,085,134 (31.2%)	938,804 (29.6%)	2,023,938 (30.4%)
30-39	3,383,447 (25.3%)	2,950,819 (25.5%)	6,334,266 (25.4%)	946,606 (27.3%)	978,279 (30.8%)	1,924,885 (29.0%)
40-49	1,953,418 (14.6%)	1,884,370 (16.3%)	3,837,788 (15.4%)	556,035 (16.0%)	550,174 (17.3%)	1,106,209 (16.6%)
50-59	1,206,394 (9.0%)	1,122,469 (9.7%)	2,328,863 (9.3%)	270,309 (7.8%)	198,458 (6.3%)	468,767 (7.1%)
60-64	456,513 (3.4%)	399,237 (3.5%)	855,750 (3.4%)	92,928 (2.7%)	36,736 (1.2%)	129,664 (2.0%)
65+	1,118,879 (8.4%)	861,787 (7.5%)	1,980,665 (7.9%)	296,637 (8.5%)	167,799 (5.3%)	464,435 (7.0%)
TOTAL¹	13,367,069 (100.0%)	11,550,350 (100.0%)	24,924,151 (100.0%)	3,472,648 (100.0%)	3,175,140 (100.0%)	6,647,789 (100.0%)

¹ Includes accidents where driver's age was unreported.

Of the estimated 31 million accidents during the five-year period prior to the 1990 NPTS survey, 79% were reported and 21% unreported. Regardless of accident reporting status, about 80% of the accidents involved automobiles.

TABLE 10.3

COMPARISON OF REPORTED ACCIDENTS AND UNREPORTED ACCIDENTS BY TYPE OF VEHICLE IN ACCIDENTS 1990 NPTS

Vehicle Type ¹	Reported Accident	Unreported Accident	Dist. of Household Vehicles
Automobile	20,023,420 (80.3%)	5,379,782 (80.9%)	74.7%
Pickup Truck	2,733,275 (11.0%)	727,065 (10.9%)	17.2%
Van	1,029,096 (4.1%)	304,692 (4.6%)	5.5%
Other Truck	727,816 (2.9%)	145,321 (2.2%)	0.6%
Motorcycle	211,506 (0.8%)	64,926 (1.0%)	1.3%
Other	150,012 (0.6%)	26,003 (0.4%)	0.7%
TOTAL²	24,924,151 (100.0%)	6,647,789 (100.0%)	100.0%

¹ Refers to the vehicle that was driven by the household member being interviewed. The above table does not purport to display all vehicles in the accident, only the one driven by the interviewed household member who was involved in the accident.

² Includes accidents where vehicle type was unreported.

TABLE 10.4

**COMPARISON OF REPORTED ACCIDENTS AND UNREPORTED ACCIDENTS BY OTHER VEHICLE INVOLVEMENT
1990 NPTS**

	Single-Vehicle Accident	Multiple-Vehicle Accident	Unknown	TOTAL
Reported	2,497,798 (10.0%)	22,372,766 (89.9%)	53,587 (0.2%)	24,924,151 (100.0%)
Unreported	1,517,530 (22.8%)	5,130,259 (77.2%)	0 (0.0%)	6,647,789 (100.0%)
Unknown	100,057 (22.7%)	211,926 (48.0%)	129,564 (29.3%)	441,547 (100.0%)
TOTAL	4,115,385 (12.9%)	27,714,951 (86.6%)	183,151 (0.6%)	32,013,487 (100.0%)

Almost one-fourth of all unreported accidents were single-vehicle accidents, but only 10% of reported accidents involved one vehicle. According to the literature, a plausible rea-

son for single-vehicle accidents not being reported might be to avoid increases in insurance premiums resulting from accidents.

TABLE 10.5

COMPARISON OF REPORTED ACCIDENTS AND UNREPORTED ACCIDENTS
BY NUMBER OF VEHICLES INVOLVED IN THE ACCIDENT
1990 NPTS

No. of Vehicles Involved	Reported Accident	Unreported Accident	Unknown	TOTAL ¹
1	2,497,798 (10.0%)	1,517,530 (22.8%)	100,057 (22.7%)	4,115,385 (12.9%)
2	20,584,040 (82.6%)	5,023,468 (75.6%)	183,445 (41.5%)	25,790,953 (80.6%)
3	1,467,103 (5.9%)	88,244 (1.3%)	18,037 (4.1%)	1,573,384 (4.9%)
4	188,723 (0.8%)	** (0.0%)	10,443 (2.4%)	199,166 (0.6%)
5	85,039 (0.3%)	* (0.0%)	* (0.0%)	97,504 (0.3%)
6+	47,862 (0.2%)	* (0.0%)	* (0.0%)	53,944 (0.2%)
TOTAL¹	24,924,151 (100.0%)	6,647,789 (100.0%)	441,547 (100.0%)	32,013,487 (100.0%)

¹ Includes accidents where number of vehicles involved was unreported. Also includes records where insufficient data were reported in other cells.

* Indicates insufficient data reported.
** Indicates no data reported.

FIGURE 10.1

DISTRIBUTION OF ACCIDENTS BY NUMBER OF VEHICLES INVOLVED AND REPORTING STATUS
1990 NPTS

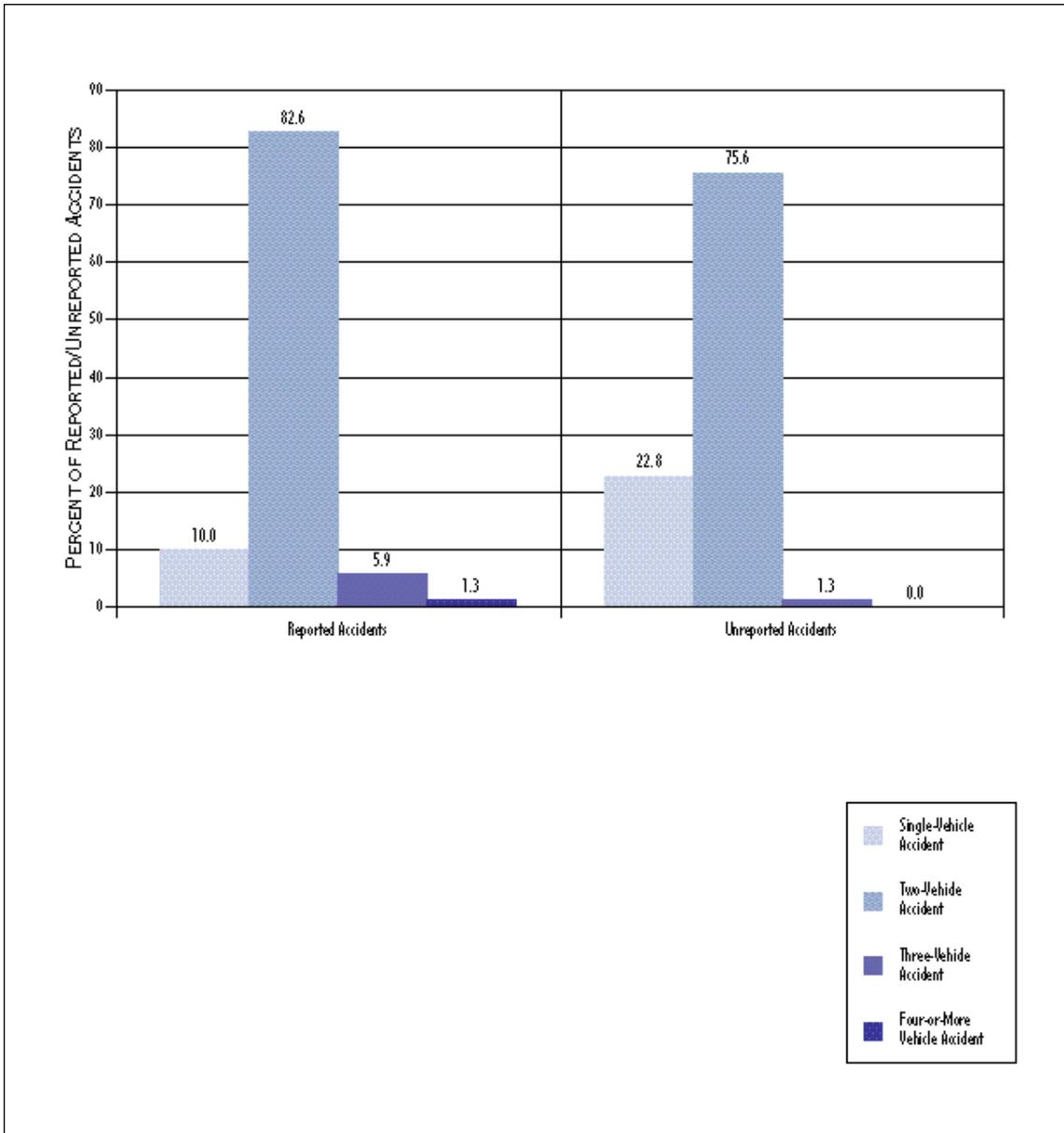


TABLE 10.6

**COMPARISON OF REPORTED ACCIDENTS AND UNREPORTED ACCIDENTS BY VEHICLE TYPE
AND OTHER VEHICLE INVOLVEMENT
1990 NPTS**

Vehicle Type ¹	Reported Accident			Unreported Accident		
	Single Vehicle	Multiple Vehicle	TOTAL ²	Single Vehicle	Multiple Vehicle	TOTAL ²
Automobile	1,930,022 (77.3%)	18,082,927 (80.8%)	20,023,420 (80.3%)	1,198,370 (79.0%)	4,181,412 (81.5%)	5,379,782 (80.9%)
Pickup Truck	302,891 (12.1%)	2,430,384 (10.9%)	2,733,275 (11.0%)	172,342 (11.4%)	554,723 (10.8%)	727,065 (10.9%)
Van	96,556 (3.9%)	932,540 (4.2%)	1,029,096 (4.1%)	49,589 (3.3%)	255,103 (5.0%)	304,692 (4.6%)
Other Truck	96,622 (3.9%)	631,194 (2.8%)	727,816 (2.9%)	55,049 (3.6%)	90,273 (1.8%)	145,321 (2.2%)
Motorcycle	44,369 (1.8%)	167,137 (0.7%)	211,506 (0.8%)	*	*	64,926 (1.0%)
Other	27,338 (1.1%)	122,674 (0.5%)	150,012 (0.6%)	*	23,017 (0.4%)	26,003 (0.4%)
TOTAL²	2,497,798 (100.0%)	22,372,766 (100.0%)	24,924,151 (100.0%)	1,517,530 (100.0%)	5,130,259 (100.0%)	6,647,789 (100.0%)

¹ See Footnote 1 of Table 10.3.

* Indicates insufficient data reported.

² Includes accidents for which information on whether other vehicles were involved in the accident, the type of vehicle involved in the accident, or both were unreported. Also includes records where insufficient data were reported in other cells.

More than three quarters of all accidents did not result in any injury or fatality. Single-vehicle accidents that did not result in any injury were more likely to go unreported than multiple-vehicle accidents that resulted in no injury, 42% vs 22%.

TABLE 10.7

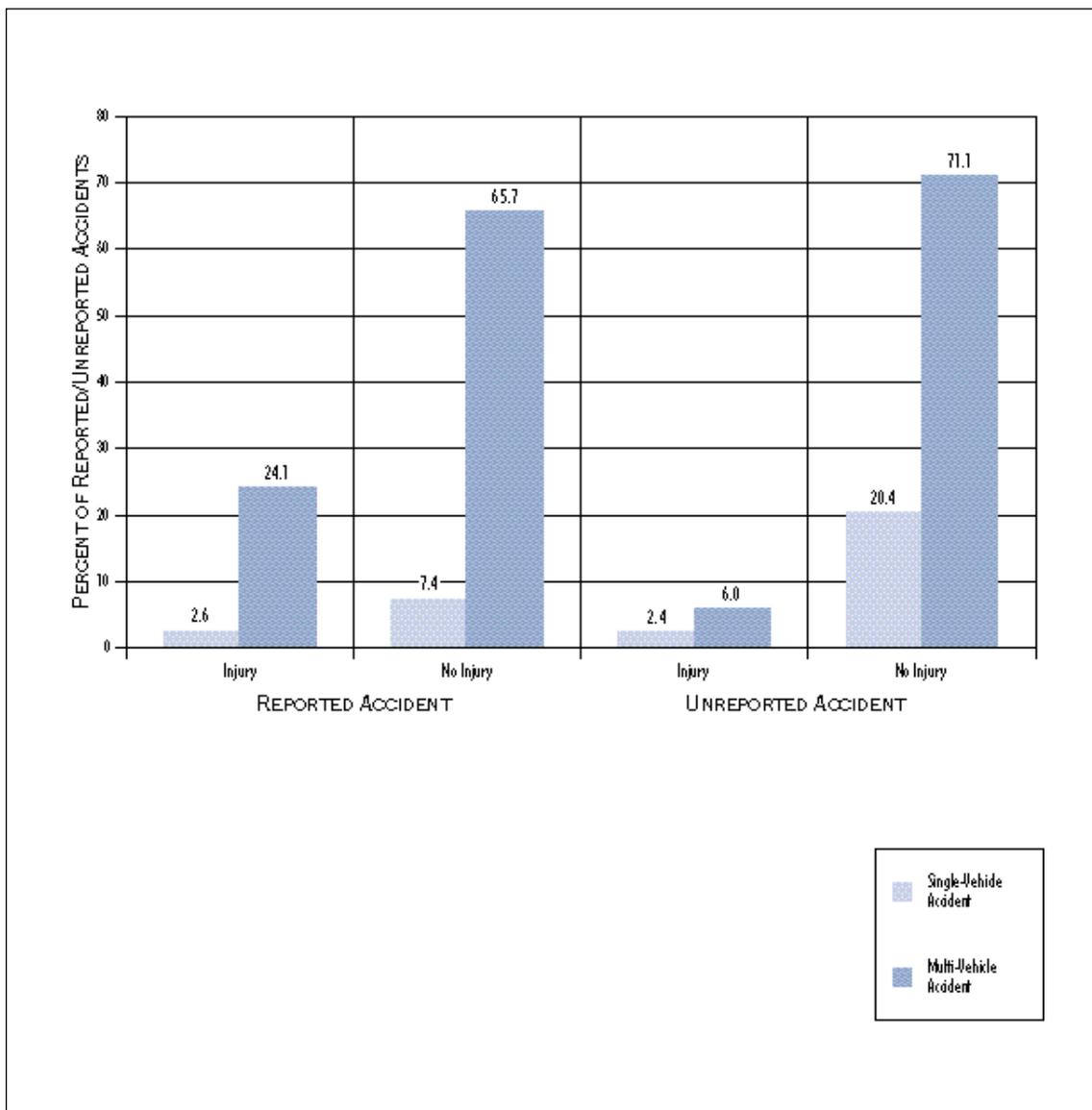
COMPARISON OF REPORTED ACCIDENTS AND UNREPORTED ACCIDENTS
BY ACCIDENT SEVERITY AND OTHER VEHICLE INVOLVEMENT
1990 NPTS

	Single-Vehicle Accident		Multiple-Vehicle Accident		TOTAL ¹
	Injury	No Injury	Injury	No Injury	
Reported	652,965	1,844,833	5,996,553	16,341,753	24,924,151
	(75.6%)	(56.7%)	(92.7%)	(77.1%)	(77.9%)
Unreported	158,971	1,358,559	395,780	4,726,482	6,647,789
	(18.4%)	(41.8%)	(6.1%)	(22.3%)	(20.8%)
TOTAL¹	863,912	3,251,473	6,466,557	21,205,638	32,013,487
	(100.0%)	(100.0%)	(100.0%)	(100.0%)	(100.0%)

¹ Includes accidents for which information on accident reporting status, whether other vehicles were involved in the accident and/or accident severity were unreported.

FIGURE 10.2

DISTRIBUTION OF ACCIDENTS BY REPORTING STATUS AND ACCIDENT SEVERITY
1990 NPTS



This table presents data based on the most serious injury that resulted from the accident. Police-reported accidents had a considerably larger proportion of serious injuries that required transporting to a medical facility

than unreported accidents. As expected, more than 97% of unreported accidents resulted in property damage only or in minor injuries that did not require any medical attention.

TABLE 10.8

COMPARISON OF REPORTED ACCIDENTS AND UNREPORTED ACCIDENTS
BY VEHICLE INVOLVEMENT AND MOST SERIOUS ACCIDENT INJURY
1990 NPTS

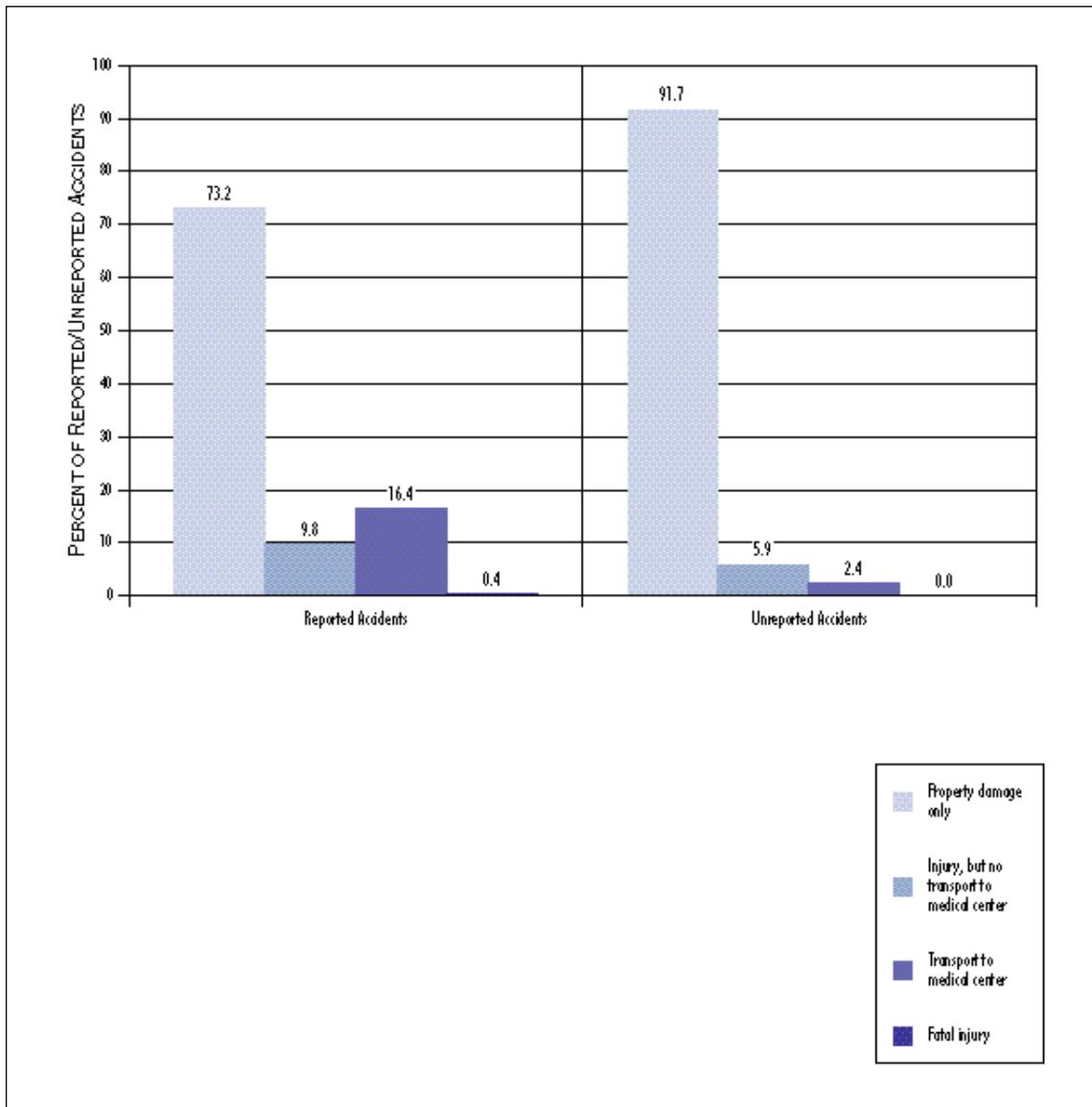
Most Serious Injury	Reported Accident			Unreported Accident		
	Single Vehicle	Multiple Vehicle	TOTAL ¹	Single Vehicle	Multiple Vehicle	TOTAL ¹
Property damage only	1,844,833 (73.9%)	16,376,214 (73.2%)	18,252,844 (73.2%)	1,358,559 (89.5%)	4,734,478 (92.3%)	6,093,037 (91.7%)
Injury, but no transport to medical center	159,781 (6.4%)	2,290,976 (10.2%)	2,450,757 (9.8%)	90,632 (6.0%)	303,727 (5.9%)	394,358 (5.9%)
Transport to medical center	471,758 (18.9%)	3,592,397 (16.1%)	4,085,943 (16.4%)	68,339 (4.5%)	92,054 (1.8%)	160,393 (2.4%)
Fatal injury	* (0.0%)	76,115 (0.3%)	97,542 (0.4%)	** (0.0%)	** (0.0%)	** (0.0%)
TOTAL¹	2,497,798 (100.0%)	22,372,766 (100.0%)	24,924,151 (100.0%)	1,517,530 (100.0%)	5,130,259 (100.0%)	6,647,789 (100.0%)

¹ Includes accidents for which information on whether there were other vehicles involved, the most serious injury resulted or both were unreported. Also includes records where insufficient data were reported in other cells.

* Indicates insufficient data reported.
** Indicates no data reported.

FIGURE 10.3

DISTRIBUTION OF ACCIDENTS BY MOST SERIOUS ACCIDENT INJURY AND REPORTING STATUS
1990 NPTS



There were about three times as many crashes within cities or towns as in the open country. This estimate is in agreement with NHTSA's estimate based on data reported in

the General Estimates System. There is no difference between reported accidents and unreported accidents in terms of where the accidents occurred.

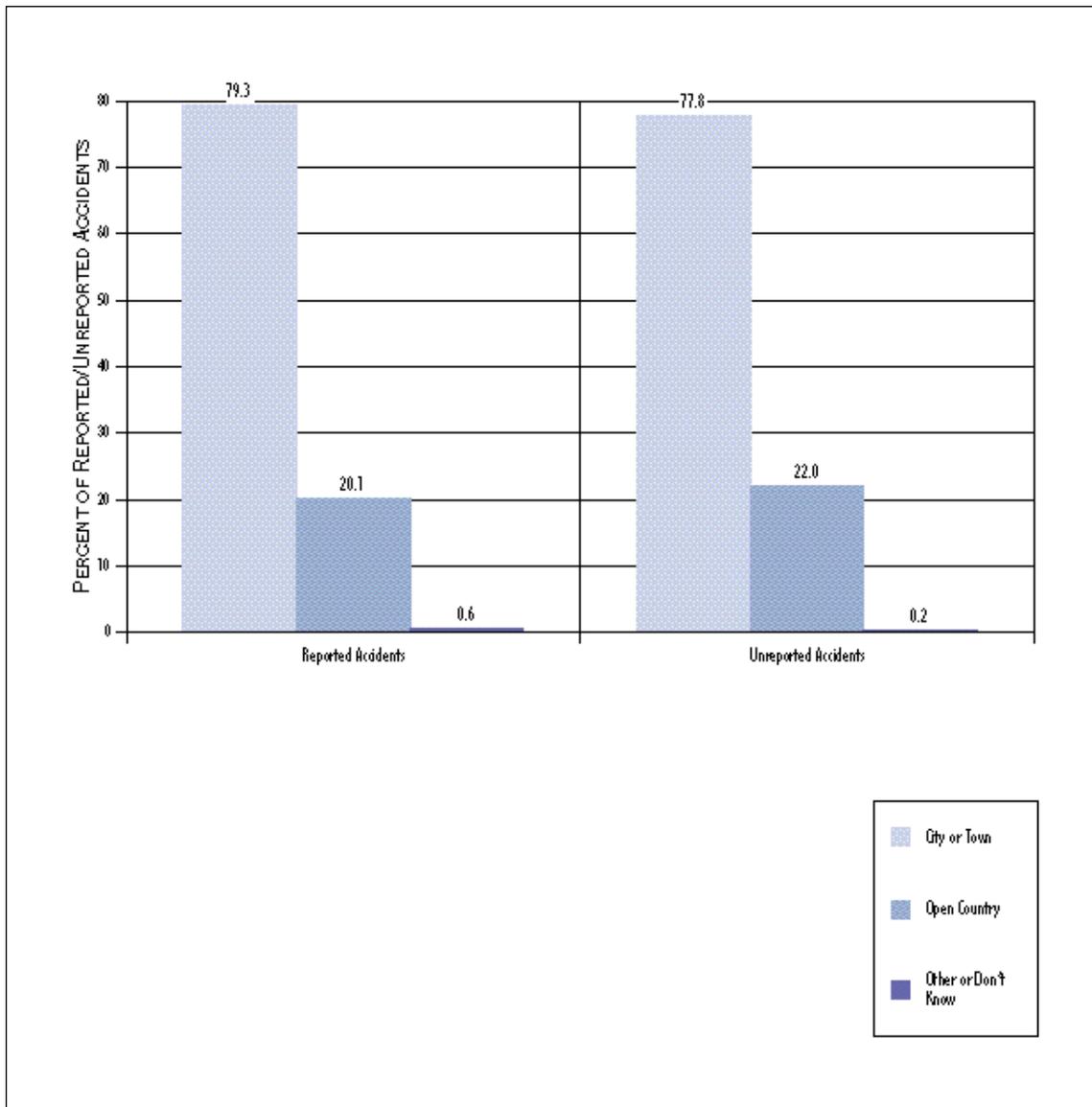
TABLE 10.9

COMPARISON OF REPORTED ACCIDENTS AND UNREPORTED ACCIDENTS BY PLACE OF ACCIDENT
1990 NPTS

Place of Accident	Reported Accident	Unreported Accident	Unknown	TOTAL
City or Town	19,774,050 (79.3%)	5,172,298 (77.8%)	243,206 (55.1%)	25,189,554 (78.7%)
Open Country	5,015,924 (20.1%)	1,459,286 (22.0%)	68,787 (15.6%)	6,543,997 (20.4%)
Other or Unknown	134,177 (0.6%)	16,205 (0.2%)	129,555 (29.3%)	279,936 (0.9%)
TOTAL	24,924,151 (100.0%)	6,647,789 (100.0%)	441,548 (100.0%)	32,013,487 (100.0%)

FIGURE 10.4

DISTRIBUTION OF ACCIDENTS BY PLACE OF ACCIDENT AND REPORTING STATUS
1990 NPTS



According to the NHTSA's estimates, 55% of the motor vehicle crashes in 1990 occurred in daylight and normal weather. This estimate is similar to what the NPTS survey data suggest - 58% in daylight (when no headlights were required) and dry road conditions

(Tables 10.10 and 10.11). Most of the reported single-vehicle accidents occurred in darkness and dry conditions, while the majority of the unreported single-vehicle accidents occurred in daytime and dry conditions.

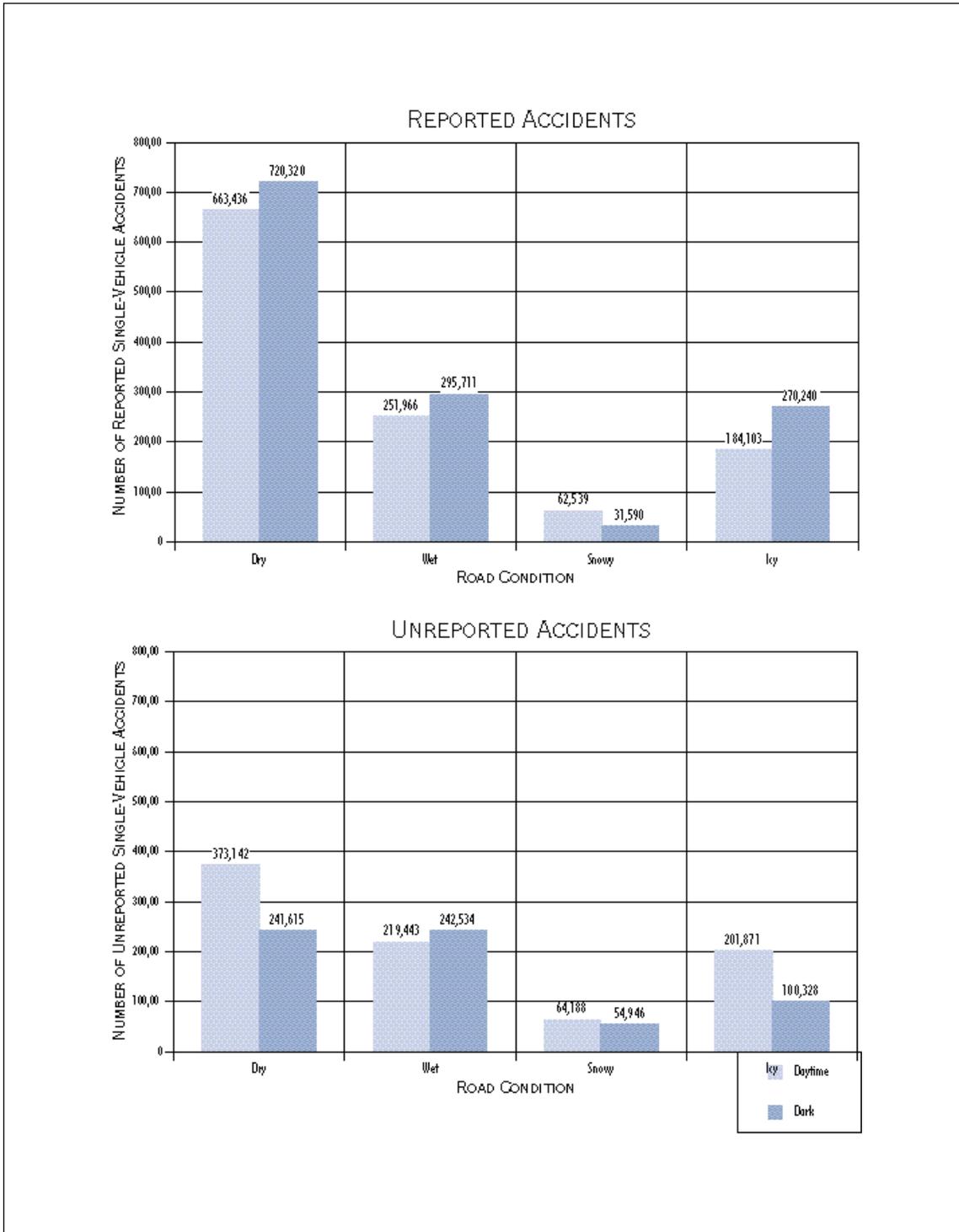
TABLE 10.10
COMPARISON OF REPORTED SINGLE-VEHICLE ACCIDENTS AND UNREPORTED SINGLE-VEHICLE ACCIDENTS BY ROAD AND LIGHT CONDITION
1990 NPTS

Road Condition	Reported Accident			Unreported Accident		
	Daytime	Dark	TOTAL ¹	Daytime	Dark	TOTAL ¹
Dry	663,436 (26.6%)	720,320 (28.8%)	1,383,757 (55.4%)	373,142 (24.6%)	241,615 (15.9%)	622,090 (41.0%)
Wet	251,966 (10.1%)	295,711 (11.8%)	554,840 (22.2%)	219,443 (14.5%)	242,534 (16.0%)	461,977 (30.4%)
Snowy	62,539 (2.5%)	31,590 (1.3%)	94,128 (3.8%)	64,188 (4.2%)	54,946 (3.6%)	119,134 (7.9%)
Icy	184,103 (7.4%)	270,240 (10.8%)	454,344 (18.2%)	201,871 (13.3%)	100,328 (6.6%)	308,014 (20.3%)
TOTAL¹	1,162,045 (46.5%)	1,323,213 (53.0%)	2,497,798 (100.0%)	858,644 (56.6%)	641,688 (42.3%)	1,517,530 (100.0%)

¹ Includes accidents where light condition, road condition or both were unreported.

FIGURE 10.5

COMPARISON OF SINGLE-VEHICLE ACCIDENTS BY REPORTING STATUS AND ROAD AND LIGHT CONDITION
1990 NPTS



Unlike single-vehicle accidents, there was no difference between reported and unreported multi-vehicle accidents in terms of the light and road conditions under which the accidents occurred. Regardless of the reporting

status, the number of multi-vehicle crashes that occurred in daylight outnumbered the number of multi-vehicle crashes that occurred in dark conditions about four to one.

TABLE 10.11

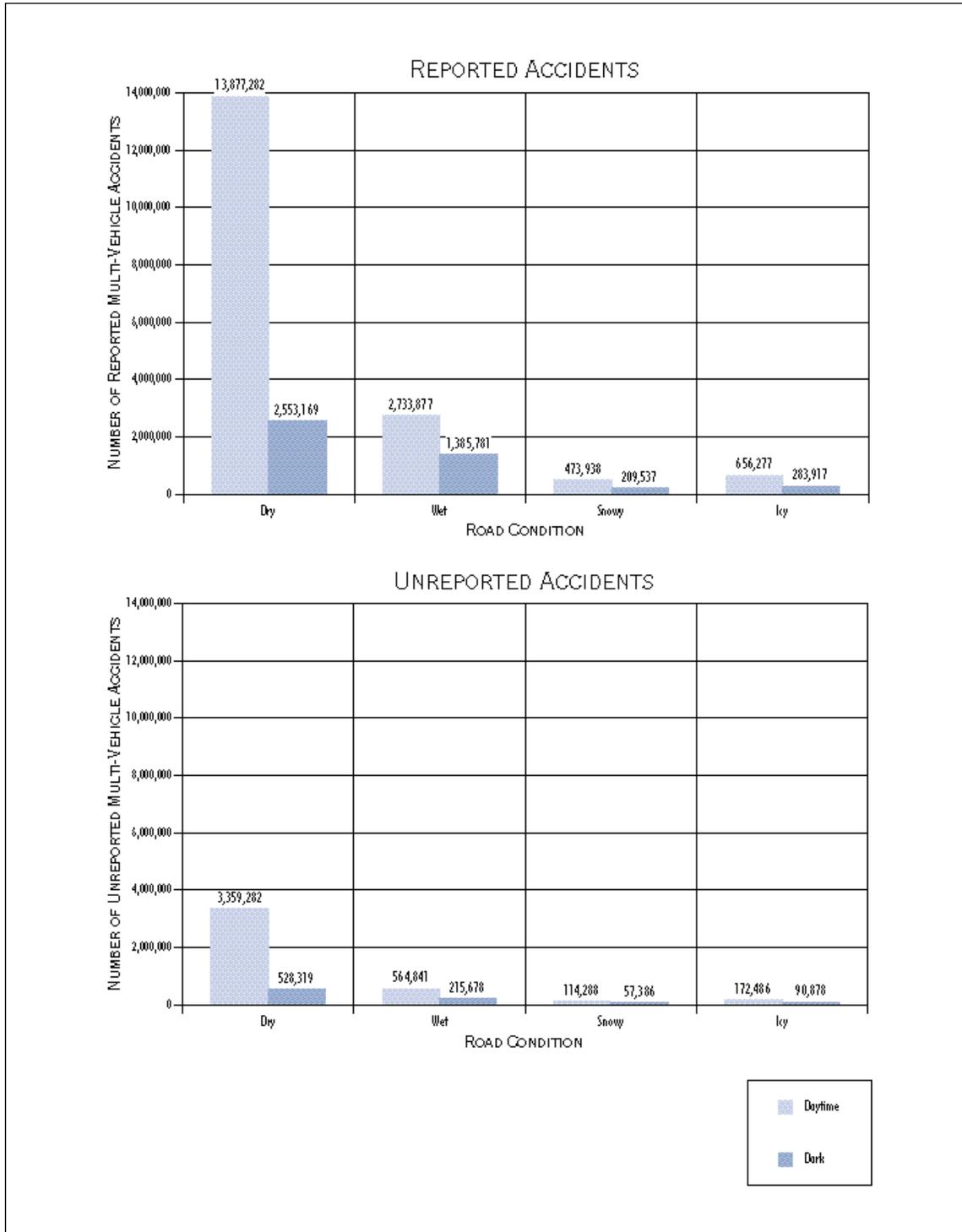
COMPARISON OF REPORTED MULTIPLE-VEHICLE ACCIDENTS AND UNREPORTED MULTIPLE-VEHICLE ACCIDENTS BY ROAD AND LIGHT CONDITION
1990 NPTS

Road Condition	Reported Accident			Unreported Accident		
	Daytime	Dark	TOTAL ¹	Daytime	Dark	TOTAL ¹
Dry	13,877,282 (62.0%)	2,553,169 (11.4%)	16,449,636 (73.5%)	3,359,282 (65.5%)	528,319 (10.3%)	3,887,601 (75.8%)
Wet	2,733,877 (12.3%)	1,385,781 (6.2%)	4,126,097 (18.4%)	564,841 (11.0%)	215,678 (4.2%)	780,519 (15.2%)
Snowy	473,938 (2.1%)	209,537 (0.9%)	683,795 (3.1%)	114,288 (2.2%)	57,386 (1.1%)	171,674 (3.3%)
Icy	656,277 (2.9%)	283,917 (1.3%)	948,115 (4.2%)	172,486 (3.4%)	90,878 (1.8%)	263,364 (5.1%)
TOTAL¹	17,832,733 (79.7%)	4,469,639 (20.0%)	22,372,766 (100.0%)	4,237,998 (82.6%)	892,260 (17.4%)	5,130,259 (100.0%)

¹ Includes accidents where light condition, road condition or both were unreported.

FIGURE 10.6

COMPARISON OF MULTIPLE-VEHICLE ACCIDENTS
BY REPORTING STATUS AND ROAD AND LIGHT CONDITION
1990 NPTS



THE NATIONAL ACCIDENT DATA ANALYSIS CENTER



NATIONWIDE PERSONAL TRANSPORTATION SURVEY