*This story was produced by*[*Wisconsin Watch*](http://www.wisconsinwatch.org/)*, a nonprofit, nonpartisan investigative reporting organization that focuses on government integrity and quality of life issues in Wisconsin.*

**Milwaukee eyes driver education to combat reckless driving crisis**

*By Edgar Mendez, Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service*

Monique Meese is worried about reckless driving in Milwaukee — a deadly threat that Acting Mayor Cavalier Johnson has declared a public health crisis.

Yet she feels hopeful for the next generation of drivers, which includes her 17-year-old daughter, Alannah.

The reason? More young people now have access to affordable driver education through the [Milwaukee Recreation Driver Education](https://milwaukeerecreation.net/rec/Programs/Driver-Education.htm) program.

The [City-County Carjacking and Reckless Driving Task Force](https://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/ccCouncil/District-10-Murphy/PDFs/FINALReport6-7-2020-1.pdf), which includes government officials and community members, has identified expanding access to driver education as a way to combat reckless driving.

Such efforts are greatly needed because “Milwaukee is on a whole different level and has been getting worse” when it comes to dangerous driving, Meese said.

Her daughter, a Rufus King High School junior, is one of more than 7,600 students to participate in the driver education program since it relaunched in 2016.

Now called MPS Drive, the program had been on a 10-year hiatus at Milwaukee Public Schools because of a lack of funding before advocates pushed to bring it back.

Meese said her daughter began her classes virtually in September and was initially nervous to hit the roads. But when the time came for Alannah to demonstrate her skills in person after she completed the written exam, she was ready.

“My daughter felt confident when going in to take the road test and felt that she would not have passed without taking the lessons,” Meese said.

Alannah is now one of 4,855 to earn their probationary license through the program since 2016, said Jodie Donabar, supervisor of driver education for Milwaukee Recreation, also known as MKE REC.

Teen drivers were involved in 3,278 Milwaukee County crashes resulting in 13 deaths and 1,379 injuries in 2021, according to the most recent Wisconsin Department of Transportation data. Speed was identified as a factor in 551 of those crashes and in 10 deaths. In total, there were 86 road fatalities in Milwaukee County in 2021, with speed being a factor in 36 deaths.

**Road deaths surge nationwide**

[Communities nationwide](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/us/pedestrian-deaths-pandemic.html) are seeing higher casualties from speeding and reckless driving — particularly during the pandemic. That includes elsewhere in Wisconsin, where residents are pushing for solutions in cities including [Madison](https://www.channel3000.com/a-public-health-crisis-residents-officials-sound-alarm-as-death-toll-climbs-from-e-washington-ave-crashes/) and [Appleton](https://www.appleton.org/home/showpublisheddocument/23668/637396645173530000).

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration projects that 31,720 people died in motor vehicle traffic crashes from January through September 2021, up 12% from projections a year earlier.

“We have to change a culture that accepts as inevitable the loss of tens of thousands of people in traffic crashes,” Steven Cliff, NHTSA deputy administrator, [said in a Feb. 1 statement](https://www.nhtsa.gov/press-releases/traffic-fatalities-estimates-jan-sept-2021#:~:text=NHTSA%20projects%20that%20an%20estimated,first%20nine%20months%20of%202020.). “This will require a transformational and collaborative approach to safety on our nation’s roads.”

Wisconsin saw about 601 traffic deaths in 2021, according to [preliminary state data](https://wisconsindot.gov/Pages/about-wisdot/newsroom/statistics/monthfatal.aspx)— above the 2017-20 average of 578.

With deaths mounting in Milwaukee, Johnson in December declared reckless driving a public health crisis — [his first official act](https://www.wpr.org/enough-enough-incoming-milwaukee-mayor-takes-wheel-curb-reckless-driving) as mayor after replacing Tom Barrett, who resigned to become ambassador to Luxembourg. The issue has [drawn significant](https://www.wuwm.com/2022-02-14/residents-ask-milwaukee-mayoral-candidates-how-they-would-address-reckless-driving) attention in Johnson’s campaign to retain office, with Johnson [calling for](https://city.milwaukee.gov/ImageLibrary/Groups/ccCouncil/News/2021/District-02/CombinedIncomingMayorJohnsonrecklessdrivingplan.pdf) a boost to driver education, traffic enforcement and community engagement around the issue. He faces former Ald. Bob Donovan, who has said “an atmosphere of lawlessness” around driving has emerged in Milwaukee and that the city needs to [grow its police force to keep up](https://www.wpr.org/bob-donovan-wants-milwaukee-get-more-police-officers-after-recent-cuts).

**Impact of COVID**

Classes through MKE REC have run at [reduced capacity](https://milwaukeenns.org/2021/02/04/hundreds-of-mps-students-struggle-to-find-affordable-drivers-ed-classes-during-pandemic/) since the pandemic began, first just online and then virtually and in person at 16 public high schools, Donabar said. The program returned to full capacity this month, but due to the increase in COVID-19 cases, all classes have moved online for now. The classes for January and February filled up in four hours, she said, while 800 slots for March and April have also been filled.

“Our goal is to reach as many students as we can to give them the tools to be a safe driver,” she said. “Then they can drive responsibly and on their own.”

Juan Garcia, who’s been driving for two years, earned his license in 2019 after participating in the program while a student at Carmen High School’s Southeast Campus.

He said his instructor taught him important safety lessons such as keeping both hands on the wheel at all times and to always look both ways at four-way stops. He said he’s happy he learned to drive responsibly, something he wishes he saw more of in the city.

“There’s a lot of people who really have a heart and like to keep safe, while others want to rush all the time,” he said.

The classes for Milwaukee Public Schools students cost $35, which covers the cost of the permit itself while classroom lessons and behind-the-wheel instruction are free. Non-MPS students can also take classes through Milwaukee Recreation for $150. Driver education courses offered at private businesses can cost upward of $300.

**Classes praised**

Municipal Court Judge Derek Mosley, a member of the City-County Carjacking and Reckless Driving Task Force, said the classes are essential.

“The major reason why it’s so key to reducing reckless driving is because at least people are getting a basic education and understanding of the rules of the road when they obtain their permit and receive their driver’s licenses,” Mosley said. “That wasn’t happening before driver’s ed.”

He said the gap in driver education has affected two generations — those who didn’t have access to classes and those who are learning from the examples of those drivers.

Mosley said the young people who come into his courtroom for driving infractions know when they’re speeding. But he said they are unaware that other common reckless driving practices, such as baselining, which is driving in the parking, bike or turn lane, are illegal.

“Some people don’t even know what yellow lights mean or how to drive on roundabouts,” said Mosley, adding that he’d like to see options such as attending traffic safety school for those who come into his courtroom.

He also wants novice drivers to be aware that if they receive a ticket for a failure to yield, they must complete a state-required course — in addition to any other penalties — or risk having their driving privileges suspended.

People should also be warned that if they are caught driving while smoking marijuana, they will be charged with driving under the influence, and there is no reduced penalty for minors.

“It affects your driver’s license, you have to complete an AODA (alcohol and other drug abuse) course, and it affects the insurance you have to get,” Mosley said. “With the fine, which is almost $1,000, the insurance and other legal fees and repercussions, it’s all very costly.”

Donabar said the driver education program benefits students— and their families.

“As their student goes through the program, the families are going to start learning some of it and take it to heart, too,” she said. “They can serve as an example of how to be a safe driver.”

*A version of this story was originally published by*[*Milwaukee Neighborhood News Service.*](https://milwaukeenns.org/)*Jim Malewitz, Wisconsin Watch deputy managing editor, contributed reporting. The nonprofit Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism (*[*wisconsinwatch.org*](https://wisconsinwatch.org/)*) collaborates with Wisconsin Public Radio, PBS Wisconsin, other news media and the UW-Madison School of Journalism and Mass Communication. All works created, published, posted or disseminated by the Center do not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of UW-Madison or any of its affiliates.*