



Agency Procedures for Release and Security of Research Data Collected Under The Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS)

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National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA)
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Introduction

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is authorized by Congress (Title 49 U.S.C., Section 30166 and 30168 and 23 U.S.C., Section 403) to collect statistical data on fatal motor vehicle traffic crashes to aid in the development, implementation and evaluation of motor vehicle and highway safety countermeasures. The Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) is the mechanism through which NHTSA collects nationally a census of fatal traffic crashes within the 50 States, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. To be included in FARS, a crash must involve a motor vehicle traveling on a trafficway customarily open to the public and result in the death of a person (occupant of a vehicle or a non-motorist) within 30 days of the crash.

The procedures outlined in this document govern the security and release of research data collected in the FARS. These procedures are followed by FARS State personnel (FARS analysts and supervisors), NHTSA Headquarters and Regional staff, and FARS contractors during data gathering, review, data processing, editing, storage and analysis. The FARS management monitors these procedures through quality control practices, including case review, examination of the data files, reporting and periodic field observation.

Regardless of the mode of data collection, the agencies and individuals are assured by the FARS Headquarters Management that any information obtained which identifies the individual will be held CONFIDENTIAL. The preservation of the confidentiality of individuals is statutorily mandated. This requirement serves to ensure the public trust in the program and enhance the analyst's ability to solicit the required information.

Data Controls

The information solicited through the NHTSA's FARS data collection program: (1) is not retrievable by an individual's name or other personal identifier; (2) is disseminated in conformance with the Freedom of Information Act; (3) has other information, such as death certificate numbers and the last 6 digits of the vehicle identification number (VIN) deleted from releasable files; and (4) is maintained under secured conditions to guard against tampering and unauthorized release.

1. Relation to the Privacy Act

The FARS files are not considered to be a system of records under the Privacy Act. The names of individuals are not entered into automated or hard copy case files, and the cases cannot be retrieved by any unique number, symbol, or other identifying variables. Reports of FARS crash data collections must be made available to the public in a manner that does not identify individuals (Public Law 89-564). These privacy safeguards create greater privacy rights than those afforded by the Privacy Act because the personal information, which the Privacy Act is designed to protect, is deleted from all FARS files.

2. Relation to the Freedom of Information Act

When information is requested, it is the policy of NHTSA, under the Freedom of Information Act, to search the files on the basis of non-personal identifiers supplied by the requestor, and retrieve what could possibly be the subject crash(es). If the search of these files does produce what could possibly be the subject crash(es), this information is then released to the inquiring party. When specific cases are requested, NHTSA cannot authenticate that the identified and released cases represent the crashes in question because unique identifiers are absent from the analysis files.

3. Completion of Quality Control Before Release

All information is collected, assembled, derived or computed by the FARS contractors in accordance with the requirements of the contract. The terms of the contract forbid the release of this information without prior written approval from NHTSA. FARS crash case information will not be released until all quality control procedures are completed.

FARS Data Security and Data Release

FARS obtains fatality data through State data files, with the police traffic crash report as the primary source. Additionally, FARS analysts use other State data files, such as driver records, vehicle records and medical records. Trained personnel interpret and code data directly from the police traffic crash reports onto an electronic file. To protect individual privacy, personal information, such as names, addresses, phone numbers, social security numbers, etc, is not coded. However, vehicle identification numbers (VINs) and death certificate numbers are coded. (VIN and Death Certificate information are used as keys to link to other electronic data sources to provide additional analytical information but are restricted to authorized users).

1. Data Security

Access to police traffic crash reports is restricted to the FARS analyst. The FARS analyst obtains copies of selected police traffic crash reports and codes data elements into the FARS electronic computer database. To protect individual privacy, the analyst does not keep backup copies of police traffic crash reports.

Quality Control and Data Entry Level - During data interpretation and encoding, only the FARS coders and coding supervisors have access to the police traffic crash reports. Coding is done on personal computers with access restricted by password control to the FARS Analysts. Periodically the coded information is transmitted by way of secure network over the Internet to a central operations server and made available to authorized personnel — FARS Analysts and Supervisors, and NHTSA management personnel — on the private, password-secured FARS Intranet application. Once the police traffic crash reports are coded, they are kept in locked cabinets until destroyed. NHTSA FARS HQ Management requires that copies of police traffic crash reports be maintained on site only for the current data collection year plus two preceding years. All older police traffic crash reports are destroyed by the state FARS analysts.

Security of Death Certificate and VIN Information in FARS Files

- Master Automated File - The only automated file having need of special security is the master automated file, which contains the death certificate number and the production number portion of the VIN. Master automated file security is protected by limiting access. The only access to this file is through the Data Base Administrator at NHTSA who is assigned responsibility for automated data file building, maintenance and security, and the data processing contractor. The library copy of the master automated file is kept under secure conditions at the facility of the FARS computer contractor. The operating version of the master automated file, which is on line at the facility of the FARS computer contractor, is restricted to access only by selected automated file management staff that is approved by the Data Base Administrator. No analysts may access the master auto-

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mated file without the permission of the Data Base Manager, the FARS Program Manager, and the Director of the National Center for Statistics and Analysis (NCSA). Analysis of the master automated file is limited to analysts of the NCSA.

- Automated Analysis File - The automated analysis file contains no personal or individual vehicle identification. It does not contain the Death Certificate number or the sequential production number portion of the VIN (positions 12-17 of the 17 digit VIN structure). Copies of the automated analysis file are made available to the public through the FARS website and the Volpe Center (www.volpe.dot.gov)¹.

2. Data Release

FARS files are made available to the public for review and analysis after all conditions of quality control and privacy are met. Annual FARS FTP files are posted on NHTSA's website (www.nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/departments/nrd-30/nca) for public use.

Availability of FARS data in various formats is discussed in each year's Traffic Safety Facts annual publication. The following excerpt from the Traffic Safety Facts 2001 (DOT HS 809 484) discusses how released FARS information can be obtained:

Data Availability

While this report presents a wide spectrum of information in more than 100 tables and figures, it contains only a fraction of the data available from FARS and GES. Additional data from FARS (1975 through 2001) or from GES (1988 through 2001) are available in four ways:

- Modest requests for specific data will be answered by NCSA at no charge. Response usually requires about 2 weeks, depending on the nature and complexity of the data requested.
- Compact disks can be purchased in one of several formats amenable to analysis. This will enable you to process the data using your own computer system. Information on acquiring the compact disks is available by contacting the Volpe Center at the following address:

Attn: Marjorie Saccoccio
USDOT Volpe National Transportation Systems Center
DTS-23
55 Broadway
Cambridge, MA 02142
(617) 494-2640
(617) 494-3770 (FAX)

6 ¹ The John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is part of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Research and Special Programs Administration.

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- FARS and GES data can be obtained by downloading any of the published files from the Internet, at *ftp://ftp.nhtsa.dot.gov/FARS* or *ftp://ftp.nhtsa.dot.gov/GES*. The files are available in SAS, sequential ASCII, and (for FARS only, not GES) SQL file formats. This will enable you to process the data using your own computer system.
- FARS data can also be accessed on the world wide web at *www-fars.nhtsa.dot.gov*. This web site provides instant access to the 1994 through 2001 FARS data via the Create-a-Query, Create-a-Map, and Reports features. The Create-a-Query feature will enable you to process the data using our interactive user interface. The Create-a-Map feature will enable you to create state-by-state and county-by-county map displays from an inventory of report selections. The Reports feature is an inventory of the fatality statistical reports found in this publication. These are national reports for current and past years that may be customized by selection of state; and for state reports, county tabulation may be needed.

Requests for more information from FARS or GES should be directed to:

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
National Center for Statistics and Analysis
NPO-121
400 Seventh Street, S.W.
Washington, DC 20590
(202) 366-4198 or 1-800-934-8517
(202) 366-7078

Additional information on all NHTSAs data files, including FARS and GES, can be found on the NCSA world wide web site: *www-nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/departments/nrd-30/nca*. Current fact sheets, as well as recent NCSA research notes and abstracts of technical reports, can be downloaded in portable document format (.pdf). Comments and suggestions about the NCSA web site can be e-mailed to the following address: *ncsaweb@nhtsa.dot.gov*

2.1 Release of Automated Analysis Files

- a. Quality Control - To ensure that any data released is accurate, a number of conditions for quality control, documentation, completeness, and privacy must be met. The conditions are as follows:
 - The data set has been edited and thoroughly analyzed for completeness, and acceptable quality and error levels.
 - The Death Certificate numbers, and the sequential production number portion of the VIN have been removed to eliminate the possibility of indirect privacy infringement. Direct disclosure is not a problem since data on the automated analysis file do not contain elements that identify specific individuals.

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- The file is complete. That is, all data have been collected and a complete data set is available for analysis.
- b. Exclusions From Release - As stated above, no names or personal identifiers are stored in the FARS automated public files. For purposes of vehicle identification in safety defect research, the full VIN is collected by FARS and entered into the master automated data file. Because the VIN, after analysis by trained experts, could be linked to specific individuals, release of the full VIN with any case or on an automated file would potentially compromise the statutory requirement (P.L. 89-564) that reports be made available to the public in a manner that does not identify individuals.

2.2 File Release Schedule

FARS files are released to the public upon approval by the NHTSA Administrator. There are two scheduled releases of these annual files. During August of each year, the Annual Report version of the FARS file is released for public use. This file contains all cases and case data for the calendar year prior to this milestone date. This file is used for the Agency crash publications and reports to Congress.

A second, and final, release of the FARS annual files occurs approximately eight months after the first release. This release is referred to as the FINAL file. There are some occurrences of cases and data that may not be available at the time of the first file release. Some cases and case data are not reported from local jurisdictions to the central State agencies before the Annual Report is published. These final cases and case data are included in the FINAL file. The following excerpt from the Traffic Safety Facts 2001 (DOT HS 809 484) explains the FARS data release schedule, which is repeated for each subsequent data year:

The 2001 FARS data file used for the statistics in this report was created in June 2002; however, the 2001 FARS file will officially close in February 2003. This additional time provides the opportunity for submission of important variable data requiring outside sources, which may lead to changes in the final counts. The updated final counts for 2000 are reflected in this report. The updated final counts for 2001 will be reflected in the 2002 annual report.

2.3 Policy for Distributing Data and Statistics Prior to Agency Approval

FARS national data files and statistics from the FARS file shall not be released to any individual or organization without written consent from FARS Headquarters Management prior to scheduled Agency approval.

State data and statistics from the FARS file shall not be released to any individual or organization without written consent from FARS Headquarters Management prior to scheduled Agency approval, with the following exception: The FARS-State office personnel may distribute their individual State data to any individual organization provided that the distribution adheres to state policy.

FARS Supervisors shall be responsible for carrying out individual State policy with regard to distribution of data that has not received NHTSA approval. State Supervisors must consider the status of data completeness, quality, reliability, and privacy information when considering distribution of unapproved State-FARS data.

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