

Recent Trends in Risky Driving Webinar

Opening Remarks | James Owens, NHTSA Deputy Administrator

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AS PREPARED FOR DELIVERY

Hi, I'm James Owens, NHTSA's Deputy Administrator. Thank you for joining us for this virtual webinar examining recent traffic trends. I wish we could be doing this in person, but we are fortunate to have this technology so we can stay connected while staying safe.

I'd also like to thank our Secretary of Transportation, Elaine L. Chao, for her leadership. As she frequently reminds us, safety is our number one priority, and we at NHTSA couldn't agree more.

NHTSA collects traffic safety data to help us all understand what's happening on our roads – and to work with our stakeholders to address safety issues.

Earlier today, we published a roundup of the 2019 FARS data, as well as traffic safety projections for the first six months of this year. Along with these, we also released two additional research reports on traffic fatalities and driver impairment during the ongoing public health emergency.

Here's what we saw in 2019. Fatalities decreased by 2%, which continues the encouraging three-year downward trend in deaths from traffic crashes. That translates into 739 fewer lives lost than in 2018. Pedestrian and cyclist fatalities were also down, a reversal of recent troubling trends, and the fatality rate in 2019 was tied for the second lowest in history. That's all encouraging news.

Now, let's look at the first six months of this year. We've faced some unprecedented challenges this year, including in traffic safety. As I'm sure you noticed, our roads emptied out as many people began staying at home, but we soon started hearing anecdotes about reckless driving, with officers clocking drivers speeding in the triple digits in many cases.

Given the anecdotal reports and the troubling trends emerging through the spring, NHTSA launched a brand-new summer ad campaign promoting safe driving as Americans got back out on the road.

We reminded everyone to obey the speed limit, wear a seatbelt, stay focused on driving, drive sober, and move over for law enforcement and first responders.

Over the summer, we gathered data from our State partners, and unfortunately it confirms some of the emerging trends we had observed back in the spring.

Our projection suggests that the total number of lives lost from traffic crashes in the second quarter was down by 3.3% over 2019, or 302 fewer deaths overall.

At the same time, the volume of traffic in the second quarter declined by 26%, so that the fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled actually went up to 1.42, even though fewer people lost their lives on the roads.

Because we spotted these trends early, our staff began working this summer to evaluate many different sources of data and connect with our stakeholders.

Before the health crisis began, we had started research on the presence of drugs and alcohol in fatal and near-fatal traffic crashes. That ongoing study allowed us to compare results before and after the crisis began, and our preliminary findings suggest that, since mid-March, more drivers had alcohol or drugs in their systems. Other data also suggest that many people are driving faster, especially at excessive speeds, and that fewer people involved in crashes appear to have been wearing their seat belts.

We've never seen trends like this, and we feel an urgency to work with our stakeholders to take action and turn this around as quickly as possible. 2019 was one of the best years for highway safety so far, and we want to get back to where we were.

In the coming weeks, we'll bring together State and local governments and safety advocates to discuss this data, address specific safety concerns, and begin the process of developing countermeasures.

I'd like to express my gratitude to our hardworking FARS team and to our subject matter experts, who pulled together data from many sources – much faster than the Federal government normally operates. Their efforts laid the groundwork for today's discussion, as well as our continuing series of conversations to come.

Today you'll hear from several of our experts:

- Nanda Srinivasan, our Associate Administrator for Research and Program Development;
- Chou-Lin Chen, Associate Administrator for our National Center for Statistics and Analysis, or NCSA; and
- Jamie Pfister, our Associate Administrator for Regional Operations and Program Delivery.

And to all of you watching online: Thank you so much for joining us today.