

2020 Fatality Data Show Increased Traffic Fatalities During Pandemic

Risky Driving Behaviors Including Failure to Wear a Seatbelt, Speeding, and Drinking While Driving Identified as Contributing Factors

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The U.S. Department of Transportation's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration today released preliminary estimates of crash fatalities in 2020 involving motor vehicle occupants, motorcyclists, and people walking and biking. Alongside the release of the 2020 fatality projections, [Early Estimate of Motor Vehicle Traffic Fatalities in 2020](#), the agency issued two special reports, [Early Estimates of Motor Vehicle Traffic Fatalities and Fatality Rate by Sub-Categories in 2020](#), and [Update to Special Reports on Traffic Safety During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency: Fourth Quarter Data](#).

While Americans drove less in 2020 due to the pandemic, NHTSA's early estimates show that an estimated 38,680 people died in motor vehicle traffic crashes—the largest projected number of fatalities since 2007. This represents an increase of about 7.2 percent as compared to the 36,096 fatalities reported in 2019. Preliminary data from the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) shows vehicle miles traveled (VMT) in 2020 decreased by about 430.2 billion miles, or about a 13.2-percent decrease. The fatality rate for 2020 was 1.37 fatalities per 100 million VMT, up from 1.11 fatalities per 100 million VMT in 2019. NHTSA's analysis shows that the main behaviors that drove this increase include: impaired driving, speeding and failure to wear a seat belt.

"Safety is the top priority for the U.S. Department of Transportation. Loss of life is unacceptable on our nation's roadways and everyone has a role to play in ensuring that they are safe. We intend to use all available tools to reverse these trends and reduce traffic fatalities and injuries," said Dr. Steven Cliff, NHTSA's Acting Administrator. "The President's American Jobs Plan would provide an additional \$19 billion in vital funding to improve road safety for all users, including people walking and biking. It will increase funding for existing safety programs and allow for the creation of new ones, with a goal of saving lives."

NHTSA's projections show significant increases in fatalities during the third and fourth quarters of 2020 as compared to the corresponding quarters of 2019. NHTSA will continue to carefully analyze various data sources to understand how the risks to vulnerable road users might have changed during 2020 and the contributing factors for the increase.

Preliminary finding show that traffic fatalities rose in most major categories over 2019:

- Passenger vehicle occupants (23,395, up 5%)
- Pedestrians (6,205, flat from 2019)
- Motorcyclists (5,015, up 9%)
- Pedalcyclists (people on bikes) (846, up 5%)

Crash factors and demographics reviewed by NHTSA that showed the largest increases in 2020 as compared to 2019 included:

- non-Hispanic Black people (up 23%);

- occupant ejection (up 20%);
- unrestrained occupants of passenger vehicles (up 15%);
- on urban interstates (up 15%);
- on urban local/collector roads (up 12%);
- in speeding-related crashes (up 11%);
- on rural local/collector roads (up 11%);
- during nighttime (up 11%);
- during the weekend (up 9%);
- in rollover crashes (up 9%);
- in single-vehicle crashes (up 9%) and;
- in police-reported alcohol involvement crashes (up 9%).

There are a few categories that are projected to have decreases in fatalities in 2020. Fatalities in crashes involving a large truck (commercial or non-commercial use) are projected to decline marginally (down 2%). Fatalities among older persons (65+ years of age) are projected to decline by about 9 percent.

Special Reports:

Last summer, recognizing the unique circumstances, NHTSA researchers began compiling additional data from a wide variety of sources to enhance understanding of what was happening on the roadways during the pandemic. This research led to a series of special reports, including two being issued today: [*Early Estimates of Motor Vehicle Traffic Fatalities and Fatality Rate by Sub-Categories in 2020*](#) and [*Update to Special Reports on Traffic Safety During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency: Fourth Quarter Data*](#). These update earlier reports released in October 2019, [*Drug and Alcohol Prevalence in Seriously and Fatally Injured Road Users Before and During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency*](#), and [*Examination of the Traffic Safety Environment During the Second Quarter of 2020: Special Report*](#) and January's [*Update to Special Reports on Traffic Safety During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency*](#).

NHTSA's research suggests that throughout the national public health emergency and associated lockdowns, driving patterns and behaviors changed significantly, and that drivers who remained on the roads engaged in more risky behavior, including speeding, failing to wear seat belts, and driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol. Traffic data indicates that average speeds increased throughout the year, and examples of extreme speeds became more common, while the evidence also shows that fewer people involved in crashes used their seat belts.