



Deadliest Year for Pedestrians and Cyclists in U.S. Since 1990

On average, 17 pedestrians and two cyclists were killed each day in traffic crashes in 2018. Distracted drivers and bigger vehicles may be the culprits, experts say.

By **Nicholas Bogel-Burroughs**

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More pedestrians and cyclists were killed last year in the United States than in any year since 1990, according to a report released on Tuesday by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Most of the news about traffic safety has been good in recent decades, as vehicle manufacturers have added safety features, drunken driving deaths have fallen and seatbelt use has climbed to nearly 90 percent. But in recent years, pedestrian and cyclist deaths have been a disturbing outlier.

The number of pedestrians killed grew by 3.4 percent last year, to 6,283, and the number of cyclists killed rose by 6.3 percent, to 857, even as total traffic deaths decreased. On average, about 17 pedestrians and two cyclists were killed each day in crashes. Together they accounted for one-fifth of traffic deaths.

Kate Kraft, the executive director of America Walks, a group that advocates for walking safety, said she was infuriated by the report's findings. She expressed hope that the new data would encourage politicians to make their cities safer for walkers by lowering speed limits, improving traffic signal efforts and creating more pedestrian-only public spaces.

"The fact that we have proven interventions, but we are not likely to implement them, is the tragedy," Ms. Kraft said. "These are senseless deaths."

Here are some of the report's key findings and their implications.

Larger vehicles and distracted drivers are probably among the culprits.

Some experts said that as Americans continue to purchase larger S.U.V.s and trucks, they may be making themselves safer at the expense of pedestrians and cyclists, who may not be as visible to them as they are to car drivers and would suffer more from a heavier impact.

"Larger vehicles protect occupants of those vehicles," said Libby Thomas, a senior research associate at the University of North Carolina's Highway Safety Research Center. "At the same time, they might be associated with some of this increasing risk for people outside the vehicles."

S.U.V.s and light trucks are more prone than cars are to run over pedestrians, rather than throw them up over the hood, researchers said, making fatalities more likely when they collide. And because the vehicles usually sit higher off the ground, they may have larger blind spots, especially through the rear window.

Also notable in the report are the figures for crashes involving large trucks. While overall fatalities in such crashes rose slightly in 2018 — up 0.9 percent from the year before — the number of pedestrians and cyclists killed by large trucks shot up by 9.7 percent.

Distracted driving probably plays a part as well, researchers said. About 10 percent of fatal crashes involve a distracted driver, and about 3.2 percent of drivers on the road on any given day are talking on cellphones.

“Driving distraction continues to be a big issue,” said Tom Dingus, the director of the Virginia Tech Transportation Institute.

Pedestrians can be glued to their cellphones, too, although it is unclear how often that leads to a fatality.

A report released in August by the New York City Department of Transportation found that walking and texting was rarely to blame for pedestrian deaths, but Professor Dingus and others cautioned that not enough research has been done to say definitively how often cellphone-distracted pedestrians are partially responsible for crashes.

“The days when your mother told you to look both ways before you cross the street are going by the wayside,” Professor Dingus said.

Urban areas are where the trouble is.

Over the last decade, pedestrian deaths remained nearly the same in rural areas but rose 69 percent in urban areas. Cyclist deaths have also risen significantly in those areas, up 48 percent over the decade from 2009 to 2018. Those increases far outpace population growth in urban areas, which the Census Bureau estimates at 13 percent from 2008 to 2017, according to the report.

The new figures reinforce research showing that pedestrian deaths may be more common in low-income neighborhoods, according to Jonathan Adkins, executive director of the Governors Highway Safety Association. Residents in low-income areas may be more likely to walk to jobs, stores or public transportation, and their neighborhoods may be more neglected by city agencies, with less clear crosswalk markings and worse traffic signals and signs, Mr. Adkins said.

Ms. Kraft, of America Walks, said people everywhere are choosing to walk more, both for personal health and for environmental reasons, and that cities need to adapt to that trend. All local governments should have a goal of zero traffic deaths, Ms. Kraft said, and should invest in infrastructure that is geared toward nondrivers.

More than one-third of traffic fatalities now happen ‘outside the vehicle.’

As cars, trucks and S.U.V.s have been designed to keep those inside them safer, a higher proportion of traffic deaths are happening “outside the vehicle,” a category that includes motorcyclists and their passengers as well as pedestrians and bicyclists. In 1996, such deaths made up 20 percent of all traffic deaths; by 2018, the proportion had risen to 34 percent.

Still, the number of traffic deaths in the United States has generally been declining for about 40 years. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration attributes the trend largely to two changes in public behavior that it has heavily promoted: more seatbelt use and less drunken driving.

The report said 29 percent of fatal traffic crashes last year involved a driver with a blood alcohol concentration of 0.08 percent or higher, the smallest proportion since the agency began reporting alcohol data in 1982. Total driving deaths generally increase as the economy improves and more people are on the road, so while driving deaths remain slightly higher than they were a decade ago, the mild increase heartened some experts who were worried it would be greater.

“Typically when the economy is good, more of us are working and traffic deaths go up,” Mr. Adkins said, noting that people may also seek out more entertainment and go out more at night. “That makes these numbers a little more encouraging than they usually would be.”

Even so, traffic crashes still take a major toll — killing 36,560 people in 2018, according to the report — and that is especially true among adolescents and young adults.

Americans between the ages of 15 and 24 are more likely to die in a traffic crash than in any other type of accident, including drug overdoses and other poisonings, according to 2017 figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (Overdoses and poisonings rank first, and traffic crashes second, for the population as a whole.)

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