

Minnesota pedestrian death spike illustrates grim US trend

January 5 2017, by Steve Karnowski



In this July 20, 2016 file photo, "Pokemon Go" players begin a group walk along the Embarcadero in San Francisco. "Pokemon Go" was widely blamed as a potential distraction hazard to pedestrians. However, a search of news articles turned up only two pedestrian fatalities involving active players. (AP Photo/Marcio Jose Sanchez,File)

Pedestrian deaths spiked to a 25-year high in Minnesota in 2016, illustrating what's been a grim upward trend across the country in recent years. Experts tie it to more people driving and to more distractions such as smartphones that draw the attention of drivers and pedestrians away from the road.

Here's a look at the issue and what's being done to address it:

THE PROBLEM

Traffic deaths of all kinds have been rising nationally since 2009, but pedestrian deaths have been rising faster, and they have made up a growing share of all traffic deaths. According to the National Safety Council, they've risen from 4,109 in 2009, when they were 12 percent of all traffic deaths, to 5,376 in 2015, when they were 15 percent of the total. In California and New York state, pedestrian deaths make up about a fourth of the total.

National statistics for 2016 haven't been compiled yet, and a sampling of preliminary data from a few states gives a mixed picture. Sixty pedestrians were killed in Minnesota in 2016, a steep climb from 17 in 2014 and 41 in 2015, according to preliminary figures from the state Department of Public Safety.

Among four big states that accounted for over 40 percent of the country's pedestrian fatalities in 2015, the trend continued upward in Texas, which recorded 623 by Dec. 22, compared with 559 in all of 2015. California, which leads the nation in pedestrian deaths, saw a dramatic 42 percent rise from 596 in 2009 to 849 in 2015, although preliminary numbers for the first half of 2016 showed a 13 percent decrease compared with the same period in 2015. Preliminary figures from Florida show a dip to 582 last year after 632 in 2015. New York state has bucked the national trend for a few years; it was down to a preliminary 223 last year from 307 in 2015.

WHAT'S DRIVING THE INCREASE?



In this June 8, 2016 photo, a maroon and silver truck drove, left, drives through the marked crosswalk in front of pedestrian volunteers Dave Passiuk and Nelsie Yang in St. Paul, Minn. Pedestrian deaths spiked to a 25-year high in Minnesota in 2016, illustrating what's been a grim upward trend across the country in recent years. Experts tie it to more people driving and to more distractions such as smartphones that draw the attention of drivers and pedestrians away from the road. (Glen Stubbe /Star Tribune via AP)

People are driving more as the economy improves, so more pedestrians are getting hit. Distracted drivers and pedestrians are another factor, said Kenneth Kolosh, statistics manager at the National Safety Council. Smartphone apps and texting take focus away from the road, he said. Even talking on a cellphone with a hands-free setup can be distracting.

"It's hard to pinpoint causation, but we know that more people are

walking, jogging and running more miles than ever for both recreation/health and just basic getting from place to place," said Chris Cochran, spokesman for the California Office of Traffic Safety. "We know that drivers are increasingly more distracted, especially by mobile technology, plus there is more speeding. And we know that pedestrians are increasingly also distracted by mobile technology, plus more jaywalking and nighttime walking."

WHAT'S BEING DONE?

The National Safety Council and federal agencies in October announced a campaign aimed at eliminating all traffic deaths and injuries within 30 years. It includes a push for self-driving cars. In November, the agency proposed voluntary guidelines to encourage electronic device developers to design products that limit the time a driver's eyes are off the road.

There are also some local initiatives, such as one in New York City that combines educational outreach to walkers with enforcement focused on speeding, yielding to pedestrians in crosswalks and compliance with traffic signs and signals. Mayor Bill de Blasio credits it with reducing the city's pedestrian deaths to 135 in 2015, the lowest since record-keeping began in 1910.

IS POKEMON GO PART OF THE PROBLEM?

Pokemon Go, in which players roam the real world while searching out digital monsters via GPS, was widely blamed as a potential distraction hazard after its release in July. But a search of news articles turned up only one pedestrian fatality in the U.S., involving a 14-year-old player in

suburban Detroit who was killed in October by an allegedly drunk motorcyclist. A second fatality involving someone playing the game occurred in August in Japan.

Phoning and texting while driving or walking are considered bigger problems.

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