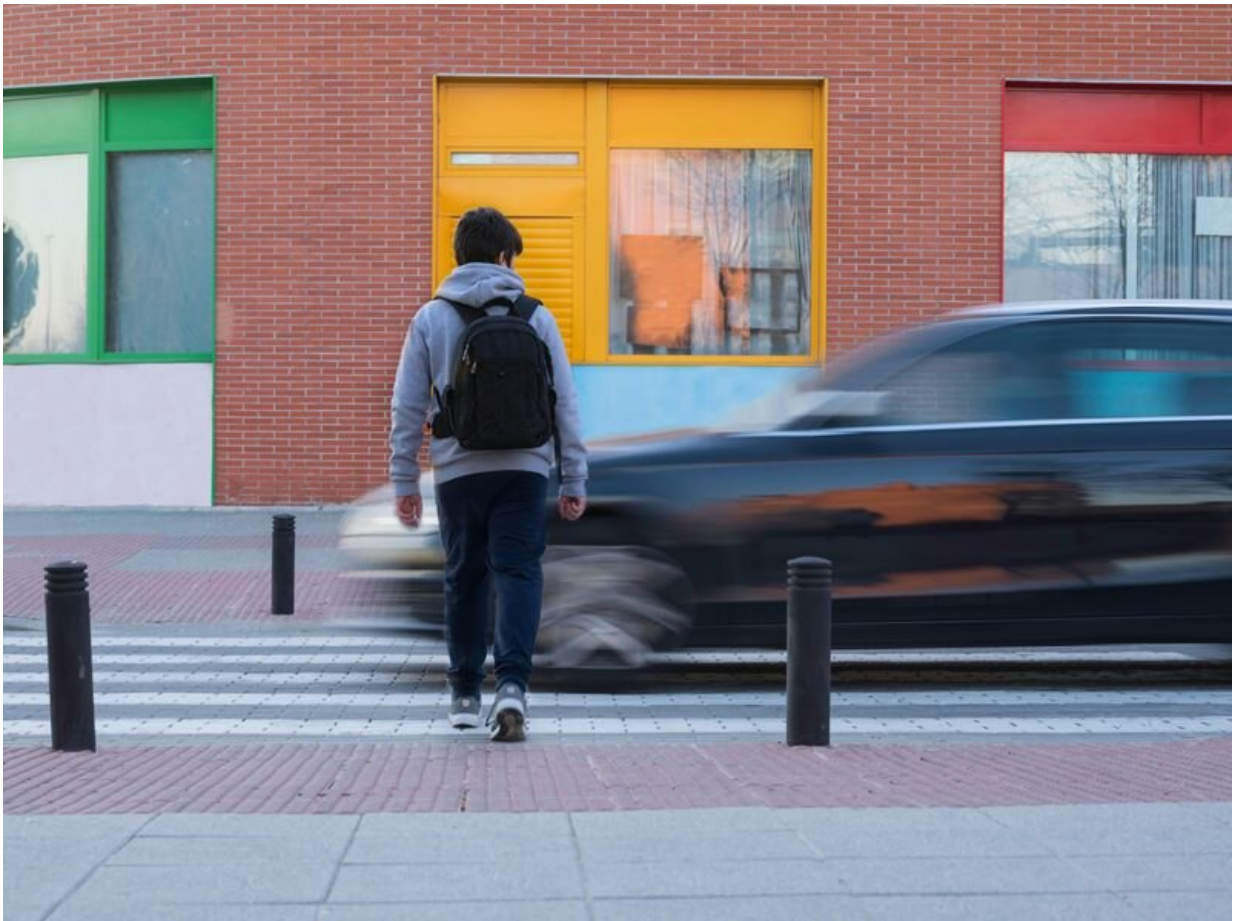


# Danger afoot: US pedestrian deaths at highest level in 41 years

June 22 2023, by Denise Mann

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More than 7,500 people were killed last year after being struck by

vehicles while walking along or across U.S. roadways—the most pedestrian deaths in more than four decades, according to a new report.

This sobering trend was not surprising to experts who track the numbers. But they were dismayed by the consistent increase—up 77% since 2010.

"This is unacceptable. It's really mind-boggling. It's hard to wrap your head around, at least it's hard for me to wrap my head, 20 deaths every single day," said [Adam Snider](#), a spokesman for the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA), which reported state-by-state numbers this week.

"And then when you think about how many people each single [death](#) affects: [family members](#), neighbors, friends, mentors, pastors, how many other people we touch in our daily lives," Snider said. "To think of all those ripple effects, I'm sometimes at a loss for words, just with how unfortunate and awful the situation is."

While pedestrian deaths have been rising sharply over the past dozen years, other traffic-related deaths also increased but at a lower 25%.

GHSA used data from state highway safety offices in 49 states and Washington, D.C., for [its report](#). Oklahoma did not provide state data, but has averaged 92 deaths annually in recent years.

The projected 7,508 pedestrian deaths nationwide last year was up 1% from 2021.

In 2021, about 77% of pedestrian fatalities happened after dark. Nighttime crash deaths have increased by 86% since 2010, compared to a 31% increase in daytime pedestrian deaths, according to the report.

Passenger cars accounted for most crashes, but deaths involving SUVs

increased at a faster rate. These bigger and heavier vehicles, along with light trucks, can cause more harm to a pedestrian in a crash.

"Some of these larger vehicles, the driver's sight lines are not nearly as good. It's harder to see people close to the vehicle, so it can be harder to prevent a collision," Snider said. "Larger and heavy vehicles are definitely one of the factors behind the awful surge in deaths."

One recent positive is a rule proposed by the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) regarding pedestrian automatic emergency braking, Snider said.

This would mandate systems—already available in some vehicles—that would detect pedestrians and automatically apply the brakes if the driver fails to do so in time.

About 69% of pedestrian fatalities happened in places with no sidewalks in 2021, up from 59% in 2017. Sidewalks can protect people by separating them from [vehicle traffic](#), but other infrastructure designs such as raised crosswalks and traffic calming devices that slow vehicles down, can provide even more protection, GHSA said.

Speeding was involved in 8% of pedestrian deaths in 2021. About 60% happened on non-freeway arterial roads, which have more traffic and higher speeds. About 18% of pedestrian deaths happened on freeways, including those involving stranded motorists and first responders.

Racial and ethnic minorities bear a growing burden in traffic deaths. While data from 2021 or 2022 were not yet available, data from 2018 to 2020 showed that deaths for white pedestrians dropped from 47% to 41%, but grew from 19% to 20% for Black individuals and from 20% to 21% for Hispanic people.

"One of the big things is there has been a historic and systemic underinvestment in infrastructure in these communities of color, things like sidewalks, lighting, crosswalks, slow speeds, road designs that slow down drivers and force vehicles to go at speeds that are safer for pedestrians," Snider said.

[Nick Ferenchak](#), center director for the USDOT Center for Pedestrian and Bicyclist Safety and an assistant professor at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, was not surprised by its results.

"It's a big complex issue. We don't really fully understand why these numbers keep on rising," said Ferenchak, who was not involved in the research.

Pedestrian and bicycle fatalities in the United States had been trending downward between about 1980 and 2010, he said. Then they sharply reversed and have continued to do so over a dozen years.

Data don't prove why, but one hypothesis is the increased use of smartphones.

"All that progress that was made over 30 years, we've just about lost that," Ferenchak said.

Among the other changes he noted was a shift in [pedestrian deaths](#) from downtown areas to suburbs in the past decade, though arterial roadways still are more common sites.

"More pedestrians are being killed and seriously injured out further into the suburbs," Ferenchak said. "We don't know if something changed about those suburbs that they got less safe or are there just more pedestrians all of a sudden walking out in our suburbs, but that's something we've been identifying and we're hoping to dig a bit further

into, to figure out why exactly that's happening."

While researchers would like to better understand what's happening, they do know what might work for reduction, including getting speeds under control, and providing better and more crossing infrastructure, Ferenchak said.

"Not only is it terrible that all these people are being killed, but also think about these safety issues as a main barrier to people being out there walking and biking," he said. "Lots of people are being killed on these streets, but there's a lot of people that are saying, 'Those streets are so unsafe, I'm not even going to try to walk or bike out there.' And then that's holding us back from environmental emissions goals, and it's holding us back from public health goals and air pollution and equity concerns."

The GHSA recommends designing and building safer roadways, engaging with homeless individuals, educating new drivers, and focusing on enforcement for dangerous traffic behaviors.

Drivers can themselves make a big difference, using 100% of their attention whenever they're behind the wheel, Snider said.

"We have to tackle this from every angle that we can to try to make a dent in these figures and reverse this crisis," he said.

The preliminary numbers were posted on the GHSA website June 22.

**More information:** The U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has more [safe driving tips](#).

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