

U.S. experiencing pedestrian fatality crisis amid surging traffic deaths

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An aerial view of traffic at the intersection of US-19 and Main Street in New Port Richey, Florida. The road, according to researchers, is the most perilous in the nation for pedestrians. (Photo by Vox)

Washington, July 28 (RHC)-- America is experiencing a pedestrian fatality "crisis," a report suggests, citing official data that points to a 21-percent surge in pedestrian fatalities in 2020 and a rise in that figure in 2021 of 11.5 percent.

"More than 6,700 pedestrians were killed while walking and using wheelchairs despite a dramatic decrease in the number of cars on the road and the number of miles traveled" due to the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S.-based Vox news outlet reports, citing official 2020 data from the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA), which released a preliminary report projecting an even deadlier year for American pedestrians in 2021.

The 21-percent hike recorded in 2020 amounted to "the largest ever annual increase in the rate at which drivers struck and killed people on foot," according to the GHSA data, which also noted that "nearly 39,000 people were killed in car crashes" in the same year, "the largest number of deaths since 2007."

The problem worsened in 2021, the report added, citing "preliminary data" from the GHSA finding that 7,485 pedestrians were killed by drivers during the year, marking yet another fatality surge of 11.5 percent over the previous year, "and the most pedestrian deaths recorded in nearly 40 years."

"We've never seen trends like this, and we feel an urgency... to take action and turn this around as quickly as possible," said the deputy administrator of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, James Owens, in October 2020 after releasing its preliminary findings on the pedestrian fatality rate.

"We face a national crisis of fatalities and serious injuries on our roadways," US Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg confirmed in May, as quoted in the report, while announcing a funding of more than \$5 billion for local efforts to make roads safer.

"We are so inured to the dangers of driving — and the death toll it regularly incurs — that many people don't recognize that the United States is an outlier among comparable countries: People are more than twice as likely to die in an automobile crash here as in Canada or parts of Europe," the report emphasized.

The report blamed the country's automobile-centered structure and the lack of adequate public transportation system. "Because life in the United States is so structured around cars — so many of us depend on them, due to sprawl and lack of good public transit, and because infrastructure in this country is built with drivers in mind — it can be easy to miss the broader crisis unfolding on our streets," it said.

The report singled out the southeastern state of Florida as "the deadliest state" for pedestrians, noting that 716 people were killed walking on its roads and streets in 2020. It said that in 2021, the death toll further soared to 899, marking "the highest numeric increase of pedestrians killed in any state."

"The way to think about Florida is as a leading edge," said Florida Atlantic University Professor of urban planning Eric Dumbaugh, who also serves as the associate director of the Collaborative Sciences Center for Road Safety. "Because there's so much growth going on relative to other places, we see trends that happen nationally go on a lot faster here."

The report pointed to "the reality" that more vulnerable people — such as those who are at a disadvantage due to their race, immigration status and income level — are more likely to suffer the consequences of traffic accidents.

"People who are low-income, who are disadvantaged because of their race, their immigration or housing status, or their status as pedestrians in an environment built for cars, are more at risk of dying" in a traffic accident, it said.

The report said that three-quarters of US roads with the most pedestrian deaths were located in low-income areas with multiple lanes, high-speed, and lots of commercial and residential development around them, citing a number of specific racially-diverse neighborhoods near the US capital of Washington, DC, New York, Los Angeles, and Albuquerque.

“They’re places where pedestrians are forced to cross roads that are dangerous by design, alongside trucks and SUVs that are getting bigger and deadlier all the time,” it noted.

The report mentioned the country’s housing crisis as yet another key factor behind the increasing pedestrian fatality rate, saying that it had created a larger population of people without homes, who are particularly vulnerable to being hit by cars.

Citing “pedestrian safety experts,” the report also offered possible solutions to prevent pedestrian traffic death, saying: “Governments could improve public transit, investing in modes of transportation that are less deadly than driving, and install more traffic cameras to discourage speeding without creating more opportunities for deadly interactions between drivers and police.”

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