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**COVID-19 Vaccines: Updates and Resources** 



# Despite Fewer Cars on the Road, Pedestrian Fatalities Are Up During COVID

By Fran Kritz



Fact checked by Nick Blackmer

April 12, 2021









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Speeding and impaired driving contributed to this increase.

There are steps you can take to keep yourself and others safe like following the speed limit when driving and sticking to cross walks when walking on the road.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, you may have seen fewer cars roaming the roads likely due to an increase in work from home and at-home schooling. But emptier streets didn't equate to a safer experience for pedestrians according to a recent report from the <u>Governors Highway Safety</u> <u>Association</u> (GHSA) on driving fatalities in the last year.

According to GHSA'		e report—which is
published annually		State Highway
Safety Offices in all		a—in the first six
months of 2020, pe		niles traveled
increased by 20%.[1		
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The report also found that:

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Despite a 16.5% reduction in vehicle miles traveled (VMT) nationwide, the rate of drivers striking and killing pedestrians jumped to 2.2 deaths per billion VMT—up from 1.8 deaths per billion VMT the year before.

An increase in distracted and impaired driving during the pandemic factored into a rising pedestrian fatality rate per billion vehicle miles traveled in the United States. [2]

Advertisement The GHSA says that for the second half of 2020 (which is d half of the year. If that's true, then 20 ever annual increase in the U.S. n. Related: The Most ( ) While Driving "Walking should no t many factors have combined to put pe **GHSA Executive** Director Jonathan A...... Advertisement Advertisement

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### What This Means For You

Despite fewer cars on the road during the pandemic, pedestrian deaths are up. In order to increase safety, drivers need to remain at the speed limit and pay attention to crosswalks, lights, and road markings. When you're walking on the road, make sure to cross at crosswalks when one is available or walk to the closest intersection that does.

## Why Pedestrians Are More at Risk Than Ever

The report also looked at 2019 data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS). The findings show that pedestrians accounted for 17% of all traffic deaths in 2019—up from 13% in 2010. [2]

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Experts say that what is especially disturbing about the data is that while pedestrian deaths have risen by 46% in the past decade, the number of all other traffic deaths has only increased by 5%.

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According to the GHSA report, advances in car safety and technology have increased survival for drivers and passengers involved in crashes. Pedestrians, however, are not protected by these interventions and remain at risk of serious or fatal injuries when struck by a car.

Jonnatnan Ensani, PnD, an assistant professor at the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, who studies how policy and behavioral research can prevent motor vehicle crashes, tells Verywell that speed plays a large role in car-pedestrian fatalities.

"From a biomechanics perspective, we know that for a pedestrian the survivability from a car crash starts going down if the car that hit them has been going above twenty miles an hour," Ehsani says. "So, if you are out walking where cars are going faster than 20 miles per hour, you have to take lots of precautions."

### **Precautions for Pedestrians**

The NHTSA offers safety tips for pedestrians, including: [3]

Be predictable. Follow the rules of the road and obey signs and signals. Walk on sidewalks whenever they are available.

If there is no sidewalk, walk facing traffic and as far from traffic as possible.

Keep alert at all times; don't be distracted by electronic devices that take your eyes (and ears) off the road.

Whenever possible, cross streets at crosswalks or intersections, where drivers expect pedestrians. Look for cars in all directions, including those turning left or right.

### Alcohol Contributed to Pedestrian Deaths

Alcohol also plays a role in dangerous car accidents. According to the GHSA report, alcohol impairment by the driver and/or pedestrian was reported in nearly half of traffic crashes that resulted in a pedestrian fatality.

A study published in the *Journal of Environmental and Respiratory Public Health* in December 2020 found that during the pandemic, adults reported high levels of alcohol consumption. <sup>[4]</sup> Those who reported high levels of impact from COVID-19 also reported significantly more alcohol use (both in terms of more days used and more total drinks) than participants who

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<u>Pam Shadel Fischer</u>, GHSA's Senior Director of External Engagement, tells Verywell that "more risky driving out there, impairment and speeding coupled with ongoing [infrastructure] problems...and you have a perfect storm which clearly came together in the first half of 2020."

## **Inequity in Pedestrian Deaths**

According to the GHSA report, drivers struck and killed more Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) traveling on foot than would be expected based on their respective share of the population.

Adkins says that the data "reinforces the need for racial equity to be a centerpiece of comprehensive pedestrian safety action plans."

According to the report, most pedestrians are killed on local roads, in the dark, and away from intersections. These findings suggest the need for safer road crossings and increased efforts to make pedestrians more visible through improved lighting and other countermeasures.

Related: How to Stay Safe Walking on the Sidewalk, Path, or Road

In the past 10 years, the number of drivers who struck and killed a pedestrian after dark increased by 54%, while there was a 16% rise in pedestrian fatalities in daylight.

Ehsani says that broken and crumbling streets; poor and broken lighting; and too few crosswalks in poor neighborhoods are other factors that contribute to pedestrian fatalities. The White House's <u>proposed</u> <u>infrastructure plan</u> could remedy some of these issues by modernizing 20,000 miles of highways, roads, and main streets.

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## A Few States Reported Good News

While the findings of the GHSA report indicate some serious safety concerns, there was also some good news for several states. The number of pedestrian deaths in the first half of 2020 compared to 2019 decreased in 20 states and D.C. Of the states that saw a decline in pedestrian deaths:

9 states reported double-digit decreases2 states reported three consecutive years of decreases

According to the report, proven strategies at the state and local levels include improvements in engineering and road design; high visibility and automated enforcement; pedestrian safety assessments and road safety audits; and traffic safety education for children.

"The decisions you make behind the wheel don't just impact you," Fischer says. "They affect everyone else out there."

Related: <u>Don't Be a Distracted Walker</u>

Safe driving also helps us as we continue to navigate life during the pandemic. "We don't want to overstress our healthcare system more than

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### **Safety Rules for Drivers**

NHTSA's safety rules for drivers include: [5]

Look for pedestrians everywhere. Pedestrians may be walking in unexpected areas or may be hard to see—especially at night, in poorly lit areas, or in bad weather.

Follow pedestrian safety laws in your state or local area—always stop or yield for pedestrians in the crosswalk.

Never pass vehicles stopped at a crosswalk. They might be stopped to allow pedestrians to cross the street.

Stay alert where children may be present, like in school zones and neighborhoods.

Slow down and carefully adhere to posted speed limits, particularly in urban and pedestrian-heavy areas.

### **Improving Safety for Everyone**

<u>David Harkey, PhD</u>, president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, tells Verywell that car technology can also help keep pedestrians safe.

Research shows that more deaths occur at night and in urban rather than rural areas. Harkey says that solutions like better lighting and crosswalks can help, but adds that front crash prevention systems—which automatically break if they sense a passenger too close to a car—are what save lives.

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"We added that as criteria to receive a top safety pick and while 44% of vehicles in 2019 didn't have the systems, for 2020 only 17% did not," Harkey says. "By 2025 automatic braking will be standard." You can also ask about that feature when you rent a car, especially if you're not familiar with the roads.

oncoming drivers. "We're starting to see prices come down with the average cost of about \$1000 to add that to a new car," Harkey says. Overall, the most important behavior drivers have control over is speed. "Pay attention to your surroundings and look for that potential pedestrian," Harkey adds.

The COVID pandemic has introduced more people to the joys of walking and biking—meaning that more people will be out on sidewalks, crosswalks, and roads. Ehsani says that "if everyone learns and implements their particular safety rules, we can see fewer deaths next year."

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