

# Pedestrian Deaths Soar in 2020 Despite Precipitous Drop in Driving During Pandemic

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*Projected fatality rate for people walking spiked 21% for largest ever year-over-year increase as dangerous driving and traffic violence plagued U.S. roads*

WASHINGTON, D.C. – New data from the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) projects that 2020 had the largest ever annual increase in the rate at which drivers struck and killed people on foot. What drove this surge? The likely culprits are dangerous driving like speeding, drunk and drugged driving, and distraction, which were rampant on U.S. roads during the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with infrastructure issues that have prioritized the movement of motor vehicles over walking and bicycling for many years.

In March, GHSA offered a preview of state and national pedestrian traffic deaths for the first six months of 2020 based on preliminary data reported by the State Highway Safety Offices (SHSOs) in all 50 states and the District of Columbia (D.C.). The report warned that while there were fewer drivers on the road, pedestrians remained at increased risk of being struck and killed by a vehicle. The new *Pedestrian Traffic Fatalities by State: 2020 Preliminary Data Addendum* (<https://www.ghsa.org/resources/Pedestrians21>), released today, provides the first look at projected pedestrian fatalities for the full year using additional preliminary data provided by the SHSOs.

GHSA projects there were 6,721 pedestrian deaths in 2020 – a 4.8% increase from the 6,412 fatalities reported by SHSOs the year before. Factoring in a 13.2% decrease in vehicle miles traveled (VMT) in 2020, the pedestrian fatality rate was 2.3 per billion VMT, a shocking and

unprecedented 21% increase from 1.9 in 2019. This projection is the largest ever annual increase in the pedestrian death rate since the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) was established in 1975.

"Last year was filled with so much death and loss as COVID swept across the country. As America gets vaccinated and returns to normal, we need to treat pedestrian safety like the public health emergency that it is," said GHSA Executive Director Jonathan Adkins. "We must strengthen our efforts to protect those on foot from traffic violence by implementing equitable and proven countermeasures that protect people walking and address those driving behaviors that pose the greatest risk."

Despite the troubling projected increase in both the total number of pedestrian fatalities and the pedestrian death rate per mile driven in 2020, there was some good news in the state-reported data. Nineteen states saw decreases in the number of pedestrians killed by drivers in 2020, with 11 states reporting double-digit declines.

The *Spotlight on Highway Safety: Pedestrian Traffic Fatalities by State* (<https://www.ghsa.org/resources/Pedestrians21>) report, which GHSA released in March, highlights proven strategies employed at the state and local level to reduce crashes and injuries to those outside vehicles, including engineering and road design, traffic safety enforcement by police, automated enforcement, pedestrian safety assessments and road safety audits, and education on safe walking practices for children and how people witnessing a crash should respond.

"The increase in pedestrian fatalities, especially against the backdrop of large, pandemic-related declines in motor vehicle travel, is especially concerning," said Richard Retting of Sam Schwartz Consulting, who conducted the data analysis. "We cannot allow ourselves to become numb to these unacceptable numbers of pedestrian deaths."

## **Pedestrian Safety Trends, 2010-2019**

The March GHSA report also examined 2019 FARS data to provide insights on trends regarding when, where, and how drivers strike and kill people on foot. Findings included:

- Pedestrians accounted for 17% of all traffic deaths in 2019, compared to 13% in 2010. While pedestrian deaths have risen by 46% over the past decade, the number of all other traffic deaths has increased by only 5%.
- Drivers struck and killed a larger proportion of Black, Indigenous and People of Color traveling on foot than expected based on their respective share of the population, while people on foot classified as white/non-Hispanic accounted for a considerably smaller proportion based on population. This reinforces the need for racial equity and community engagement to be centerpieces of comprehensive pedestrian safety action plans.

- Most pedestrians are killed on local roads, in the dark and away from intersections. During the past 10 years, the number of drivers striking and killing a pedestrian after dark increased by 54%, compared to a 16% rise in pedestrian fatalities in daylight.
- Alcohol impairment by the driver and/or pedestrian was reported in nearly half of traffic crashes that resulted in a pedestrian fatality.
- Although passenger cars are the largest category of vehicles in fatal pedestrian crashes, over the past decade the number of pedestrian deaths in crashes involving sport utility vehicles (SUVs) increased at a faster rate – 69% – than deaths in crashes involving passenger cars, which increased by 46%.

GHSA will bring together (<https://www.ghsa.org/events/Annual-Meetings/2021>) national and state leaders early this fall in Denver to discuss the increase in pedestrian and overall traffic deaths and strategies to mitigate these deaths in the first in-person national traffic safety conference since COVID-19 hit in March of 2020.

*Pedestrian Traffic Fatalities by State: 2020 Preliminary Data Addendum*

(<https://www.ghsa.org/resources/Pedestrians21>), including state-by-state data, is available on the GHSA website.

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## **About GHSA**

The Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) is a nonprofit association representing the highway safety offices of states, territories, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. GHSA provides leadership and representation for the states and territories to improve traffic safety, influence national policy, enhance program management and promote best practices. Its members are appointed by their Governors to administer federal and state highway safety funds and implement state highway safety plans. Visit [ghsa.org](http://www.ghsa.org/) (<http://www.ghsa.org/>) for more information or follow us on Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/GHSAHQ>) and Twitter (<https://twitter.com/GHSAHQ>).

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