

# PALATKA DAILY NEWS

## Fatal car crash rates rise in Putnam County

By [Peter Willott](#) on Friday, June 6, 2025

**PCSO warns drivers to slow down, say lives**



PETER WILLOTT/Palatka Daily News. Putnam County Sheriff Deputy Doug Kennedy speaks with a driver he pulled over for going 60 mph in a 40 mph zone on Friday. Kennedy said speeding is one of the most common and dangerous violations he sees on county roads.

As Putnam County Sheriff's Deputy Doug Kennedy drove his patrol car down State Road 100 on Friday, he passed roadside memorials and white crosses marking where crashes had claimed lives.

As he checked his speedometer and glanced at passing vehicles, alert for signs of reckless driving, he said the markers aren't just reminders of past fatal crashes; they are also a personal reminder to him of a very important part of this job.

A few weeks ago, he responded to a crash in Palatka where a young victim had been thrown from a vehicle and was lying in the road. Being one of the first responders on the scene, he cared for the woman before other first responders arrived. "She was lying in the road, bleeding," he said. "I'll never forget it."

The victim survived but many do not, and Kennedy sees part of his job is to change that.

Kennedy, a nearly 10-year law enforcement veteran, patrols the county's rural roads where speed limits are often ignored and modern vehicles outrun outdated road designs. His daily mission: prevent the next fatal crash.

In 2023, Putnam County recorded a motor vehicle crash death rate of 20.7 per 100,000 people, significantly higher than the statewide average of 14.9. The rate is also higher than that of neighboring counties, such as Duval at 16.3, Clay at 16.3, and St. Johns at 10.5, according to the Florida Department of Health. Between January 1 and May 31 of this year, there have already been 360 crashes in Putnam County, with 296 people injured and nine killed, data from the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles shows. Last year, there were 1,046 crashes resulting in 16 deaths, according to the state.

The problem is especially dire on rural roads like State Roads 19, 20, and 100. A September report from TRIP, a national transportation research group, found that in Florida's non-interstate counties, like Putnam, rural roads had a fatal-crash rate of 2.61 deaths per 100 million vehicle-miles traveled, nearly double the rate on urban roadways.

"Traffic in and around our major roadways is a constant concern," Putnam County Sheriff Gator DeLoach said. "With commuters from other counties, logging and other commercial vehicles, as well as a large senior population, there are a lot of different types of drivers on mainly two-lane roads."

The causes are consistent: high speeds, distracted driving, narrow roadways and delayed emergency response. And Kennedy sees them all.

"Most of the time, crashes happen because someone's not paying attention," he said. "They're looking at their phone, speeding or just being careless."

Putnam County's roads have already claimed lives this year. On May 24, a 24-year-old Gainesville man died after veering off State Road 21 and hitting a tree. Three days later, a 39-year-old Palatka man was killed when he was ejected from his SUV during a rollover crash on U.S. Highway 17. In April, a 43-year-old Orange Park man died in a two-vehicle collision south of Buckman Lock Road.

These are not isolated incidents. In February, a double fatal crash on S.R. 100 near Bardin Road left two adults dead and a child injured, prompting the formation of an 11-member local traffic safety task force. Among its members: DeLoach, County Commissioner Leota Wilkinson, Fire Chief Richard Back and Q.I. Roberts High School Principal Joe Theobald.

The Road Safety Task Force is pushing for changes on the stretch of S.R. 100 between Bardin Road and Roberts Lane, the site of 13 fatal crashes in just over a decade. Proposals include better signage, wider lanes, expanded school zones, and more law enforcement presence.

Although the task force has no direct control over state roads, members plan to work closely with the Florida Department of Transportation to seek improvements. "We are continuing to work with other law enforcement partners to educate and enforce traffic, particularly speeding and aggressive driving, but we also need the public's assistance," DeLoach said. "If you have a meeting or appointment, give yourself extra time."

Another critical tool used by law enforcement is the county's Flock Safety camera system, solar-powered license plate readers mounted throughout Putnam. They can instantly alert deputies if a vehicle is stolen, a driver has a suspended license or if there's an outstanding warrant.

"It's an incredible system," Kennedy said. "It gives us a heads-up. If something pops up repeatedly in a certain area, I know I need to focus there."

Despite the severity of the issue, Kennedy says enforcement is about education as much as it is citations.

"I don't want to write a ticket unless I have to," he said. "Some people respond better to a conversation. Others need that citation to realize the seriousness."

"We have to be public servants first, but we are also human beings dealing with other human beings."

Kennedy has spent years working as a school resource officer and is particularly alert near school zones. He shared stories of drivers speeding past students or ignoring crossing guards.

"That's one of my biggest pet peeves," he said. "You can be late. That's better than hitting a kid."

He's also an avid motorcyclist and knows firsthand how unforgiving the roads can be for riders.

"When a bike goes down, it's never a good outcome," he said. "You've got little protection."

Kennedy said he still remembers fatal wrecks from years ago, and passing the sites brings those memories back.

"There are places I'll drive by and immediately remember the scene," he said. "The wreck, the victim, the smell of the air, it sticks with you."

Meanwhile, Kennedy is doing what he can each day to keep the roads safer, one traffic stop at a time.

"Put the phone down. Obey the speed limit. And just be courteous," he said. "You're not the only one on the road. We all have somewhere to be. The goal is to get there alive."

The sheriff echoed Kennedy and wanted to remind people to be considerate of the cars around them.

"Our problem with traffic crashes and fatalities is that as motorists get frustrated, they take dangerous risks, including passing in no-passing lanes or trying to pass multiple vehicles at one time," DeLoach said. "We need everyone to think of the other motorists they share the road."