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**ADDRESSING AMERICA'S TRAFFIC SAFETY CRISIS:
EXAMINING THE CAUSES OF INCREASING U.S.
TRAFFIC FATALITIES AND IDENTIFYING
SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE TRAFFIC SAFETY**

S E P T E M B E R 2 0 2 6

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Founded in 1971, TRIP® of Washington, DC, is a nonprofit organization that researches, evaluates and distributes economic and technical data on surface transportation issues. TRIP is supported by insurance companies, equipment manufacturers, distributors and suppliers; businesses involved in highway and transit engineering and construction; labor unions; and organizations concerned with efficient and safe surface transportation.

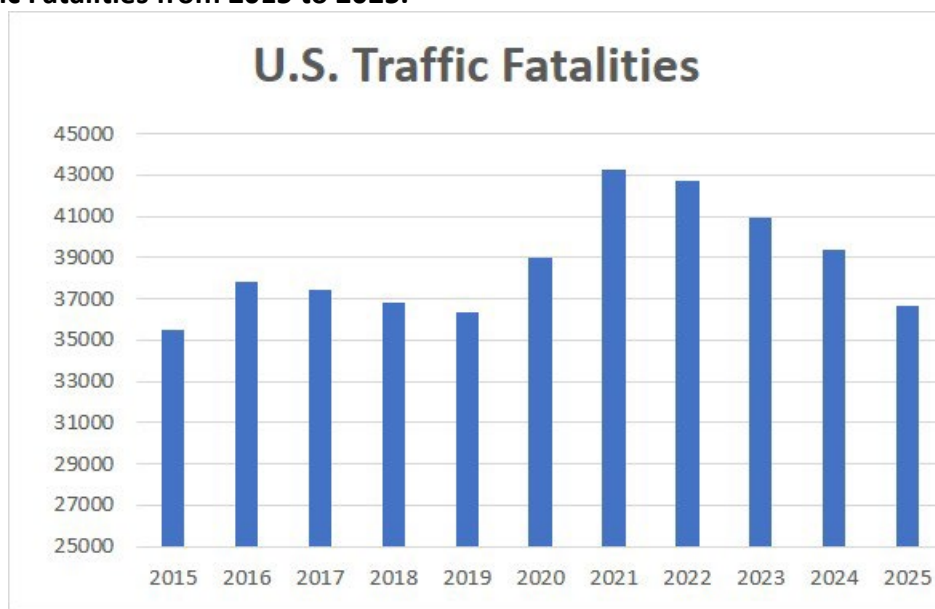
Traffic fatalities of motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists represent a critical safety crisis in the U.S., claiming 241,637 lives from 2020 to 2025. After surging in 2020 and 2021 as the nation grappled with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, traffic fatalities in the U.S. have decreased four years in a row. However, despite the decrease in traffic fatalities over the past four years, traffic fatalities in 2025 were three percent higher than a decade ago.

This report documents trends in U.S. traffic fatalities from 2015 to 2025 at the national and state levels, examines causes for the increase in traffic fatalities, and prescribes a broad, comprehensive approach to reducing traffic fatalities in the U.S.

RECENT TRAFFIC FATALITY TRENDS

In 2015, there were 35,484 traffic fatalities in the U.S., including motorists, motorcyclists, pedestrians and bicyclists, with traffic fatalities occurring at a rate of 1.15 per 100 million vehicle miles of travel (VMT).¹

Chart 1. U.S. Traffic Fatalities from 2015 to 2025.



Source: TRIP analysis of National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and Federal Highway Administration data.

The transportation impact of COVID-19 was significant, as most activity and travel were curtailed starting in March 2020 in an effort to slow the spread of the virus. Even though U.S. vehicle miles of travel (VMT) fell 11 percent from 2019 to 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. traffic fatalities increased by seven percent from 2019 to 2020, from 36,355 to 39,007.² As a result of this significant increase in traffic fatalities in 2020 despite a significant decrease in VMT, the rate of U.S. traffic fatalities per 100 million VMT increased from 1.11 in 2019 to 1.34 in 2020 – an increase of 21 percent in just one year.³ In 2021, despite vehicle travel returning closer to pre-COVID levels, U.S. traffic fatalities and rate of traffic fatalities per 100 million VMT again increased to 43,230 and 1.38, respectively.⁴

Since 2021, traffic fatalities have decreased in each year, dropping to 36,640 fatalities in 2025.⁵ However, despite decreases in fatalities in recent years, the number of traffic fatalities in 2025 was three percent higher than a decade earlier in 2015, while the fatality rate per 100 million miles of travel was four percent lower 2025 compared to 2015 (1.10 versus 1.15) as vehicle miles of travel during the same period increased by seven percent.⁶

Chart 2. Traffic Fatalities and Traffic Fatality Rate from 2015 to 2025.

U.S. TRAFFIC FATALITY AND FATALITY RATE PER 100 MILLION VEHICLE MILES OF TRAVEL									
	2015	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025	2015-2025 Change	2020-2025 Change
Traffic Fatalities	35,484	39,007	43,230	42,514	40,901	39,345	36,640	+3%	-6%
Fatalities per 100M VMT	1.15	1.34	1.38	1.33	1.26	1.20	1.10	-4%	-18%

Source: TRIP analysis of National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and Federal Highway Administration data.

The report [Appendix](#) includes the number of fatalities and the fatality rate per 100 million VMT for every state and the District of Columbia for 2015 and 2020-2025.

The chart below details the states with the highest traffic fatality rate per 100 million VMT in 2025, as well as the national fatality rate.

Chart 3. States with Highest Traffic Fatality Rate per 100 Million VMT in 2025.

2025 Traffic Fatality Rate per 100M VMT					
1	New Mexico	1.59	11	Nevada	1.32
2	Mississippi	1.52	12	Oregon	1.29
3	South Carolina	1.51	13	Colorado	1.28
4	Arizona	1.50	14	Tennessee	1.27
5	West Virginia	1.46	15	Wyoming	1.26
6	Arkansas	1.43	16	Florida	1.24
7	Montana	1.43	17	Idaho	1.22
8	Louisiana	1.38	18	Hawaii	1.22
9	Kentucky	1.36	19	Delaware	1.21
10	Oklahoma	1.35	20	Texas	1.21
U.S. TOTAL: 1.10					

Source: TRIP analysis of National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and Federal Highway Administration data.

From 2020 to 2025, the number of pedestrians killed increased by five percent, from 6,236 to 6,529, and the number of bicyclists killed increased by 29 percent, from 891 to 1,148.⁷ From 2020 to 2025, the total number of pedestrians and bicyclists killed increased by eight percent, from 7,127 to 7,677.⁸ Bicyclists and pedestrians accounted for 21 percent of all traffic fatalities in 2025.⁹

While motorcycle travel accounts for less than one percent of annual VMT in the U.S. (0.7 percent), there were 5,758 motorcyclist fatalities in 2025, representing 16 percent of all traffic fatalities.¹⁰ The fatality rate per 100 million miles of travel in 2024 for motorcyclists was 36 times higher than for passenger car occupants (28 versus .78).¹¹ U.S. motorcyclist fatalities increased by 2 percent from 2020 to 2025, from 5,620 to 5,758.¹² The share of motorcyclist not wearing helmets increased from 17 percent in 2019 to 29 percent in 2021, then dropped to 18 percent in 2023.¹³

THE COST OF TRAFFIC CRASHES

Traffic crashes in the U.S. result in a significant economic burden. According to a [2023 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration \(NHTSA\) report](#), the tangible economic costs of traffic crashes can be estimated through empirical measurements, including medical care, lost productivity, legal and court costs, insurance administrative costs, workplace costs, congestion impacts (travel delay, excess fuel consumption and pollution), emergency services, and property damage.¹⁴ NHTSA has also estimated the annual value of the lost quality-of-life cost of traffic crashes causing serious injury or death. The lost quality-of-life costs include the loss of remaining lifespan, extended or lifelong physical impairment, or physical pain.

Based on NHTSA's traffic crash cost methodology, TRIP estimates that fatal and serious traffic crashes in the U.S. in 2025 caused a total of \$1.75 trillion in the value of societal harm, which includes \$435 billion in economic costs and \$1.32 trillion in quality-of-life costs.¹⁵

The report [Appendix](#) includes the economic cost, the quality-of-life cost and the total societal harm cost of traffic fatalities for every state and the District of Columbia for 2024.

CAUSES OF THE INCREASE IN U.S. TRAFFIC FATALITIES

In 2011 U.S. traffic fatalities dropped to 32,479, the lowest level since 1949 when there were 30,246 traffic fatalities.¹⁶ By 2018, U.S. traffic fatalities had increased to 36,835.¹⁷ Beginning in March 2020, when initial restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic were implemented, the number and rate of traffic fatalities began to increase, even as the rate of vehicle travel decreased dramatically.

This significant increase in traffic fatalities, which started with the onset of the pandemic, appears largely related to increased risks being taken by drivers. In an [October 2021 report](#), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that “after the declaration of the public health emergency in March 2020, driving patterns and behaviors in the United States changed significantly. Of the drivers who remained on the roads, some engaged in riskier behavior, including speeding, failure to wear seat belts, and driving under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.”¹⁸

NHTSA data indicates that the number of people killed in the U.S. in police-reported alcohol involved crashes increased by two percent from 2020 to 2024, from 11,654 to 11,904.¹⁹

NHTSA found that the number of unrestrained occupants of passenger vehicles (those not wearing a seat belt) killed in the U.S. decreased by 21 percent from 2020 to 2025, from 12,143 to 9,546.²⁰ The share of adult front-seat passengers wearing seat belts in 2025 was 91 percent (91.3), an increase from 90.3 percent in 2020 but lower than the rate in 2023 – 91.9 percent, which is the highest rate yet recorded.²¹

NHTSA found that the number of people killed in speeding-related traffic crashes in the U.S. decreased by 11 percent from 2020 to 2025, from 12,143 to 9,546 – representing 26 percent of U.S. traffic fatalities in 2025.²²



From 2020 to 2024, the number of fatalities in distraction affected traffic crashes increased by two percent, from 3,154 to 3,208.²³ A distraction-affected crash is any traffic crash in which a driver was identified as distracted at the time of the crash.²⁴ Driver distraction is a specific type of driver inattention that occurs when drivers divert attention from the driving task to focus on some other activity. Often discussions regarding distracted driving center around cell phone use and texting, but distracted driving also includes things such as eating, talking to passengers, adjusting audio or climate controls, or adjusting other vehicle controls.

A PRESCRIPTION FOR REDUCING U.S. TRAFFIC FATALITIES

In 2022 the U.S. Department of Transportation adopted a [National Roadway Safety Strategy](#), a comprehensive roadmap for addressing the nation's roadway safety crisis based on a [Safe System](#) approach that acknowledges the following: humans make mistakes and are physically vulnerable; traffic deaths and serious injuries are unacceptable; traffic deaths and serious injuries need to be reduced by the provision of a redundant transportation system that reduces or minimizes crashes and ensures that, if crashes do occur, they do not result in serious injury or death.²⁵

Successfully implementing the safe system approach will require complimentary actions by governmental, non-profit, private, healthcare and academic organizations.

Chart 4. The Safe System Approach



Source: Federal Highway Administration

The Safe System approach, which is also being adopted by state and local transportation agencies, has five objectives:

- [Safer People](#): Encourage safe, responsible behavior by people who use our roads, and create conditions that prioritize their ability to reach their destination unharmed.

- [Safer Roads](#): Design roadway environments to mitigate human mistakes and account for injury tolerances, to encourage safer behaviors, and to facilitate safe travel by the most vulnerable users.
- [Safer Vehicles](#): Expand the availability of vehicle systems and features that help to prevent crashes and minimize the impact of crashes on both occupants and non-occupants.
- [Safer Speeds](#): Promote safer speeds in all roadway environments through a combination of thoughtful, context-appropriate roadway design, targeted education and outreach campaigns, and enforcement.
- [Post-Crash Care](#): Enhance the survivability of crashes through expedient access to emergency medical care, while creating a safe working environment for vital first responders and preventing secondary crashes through robust traffic incident management practices.

Improving safety on the nation's roadways will require that additional steps are taken to make further progress in achieving the Safe System's objectives. NHTSA, which provides states with roadway safety grants, requires states to submit a [state highway safety plan](#). The state plans outline numerous steps states are taking to improve traffic safety. Elements of these state roadway safety plans aimed at addressing the Safe System objectives include:

- **Safer People**: education on speeding, impaired or distracted driving; education on safe pedestrian and bicycling behavior; education on driving safely around large commercial vehicles; enforcement of commercial driver license and vehicle weight requirements; extension of safety belt laws and their enforcement to include all passenger vehicle occupants; enhancing enforcement action of speeding, impaired, aggressive and distracted driving, particularly at high-risk locations; increase penalties, particularly for repeat offender drivers; and increased enforcement at work zones.
- **Safer Roads**: converting intersections to roundabouts; removing or shielding roadside objects; the addition of left-turn lanes at intersections; improved signalization and lighting at intersections; adding or improving median barriers; improved roadway lighting; adding centerline or shoulder rumble strips; improving pedestrian and bicycle facilities, including sidewalks and bike lanes and providing pedestrian crossing islands; improved work zone safety measures; wider lanes and paved shoulders; upgrading roads from two lanes to four lanes; providing or improving lane markings; updating rail crossings; eliminating vertical pavement drop-offs; and providing large truck parking spaces.
- **Safer Vehicles**: Support the development, testing and deployment of connected and autonomous vehicle technology such as collision avoidance, lane departure avoidance systems and turning detection systems.
- **Safer Speeds**: Where appropriate, provide roadway features to encourage safer speeds, including traffic roundabouts and curb extensions; improved signage and dynamic speed signing at high-risk locations; education on the consequences of speeding; and increased speeding enforcement, particularly at high-risk locations.
- **Post-Crash Care**: Reduce crash response time including the use of emergency vehicle preemption technology; improve emergency response to multi-vehicle or hazardous material crashes; and increase access to level one or two trauma centers for seriously-injured crash victims.

The U.S. Department of Transportation (USDOT) prepared an [analysis](#) of the effectiveness of 28 proven safety countermeasures that offer significant and measurable impacts to improving roadway safety.

The report, titled “[Making Our Roads Safer: One Countermeasure at a Time](#),” provides descriptions of effective roadway safety measures and estimates of likely safety benefits. The following chart describes some of the critical roadway safety improvements included in the report and the resulting benefits.

Chart 5. Effective Safety Countermeasures.

Roadway Countermeasure	Documented Benefits
Application of pavement friction treatments	Reduce total crashes at intersections by 20%
Bicycle lanes	Reduce bicycle/vehicle crashes by 53%
Center-line rumble strips	Reduce head-on fatal and injury crashes on rural two-lane roads by 44-64%
Crosswalk Visibility Enhancements	Reduce pedestrian injury crashes by 40%
Dedicated left-turn lanes	Reduce fatal and injury crashes by 36%
Improved lane markings and signage at intersections	Reduce injury and fatal crashes by 10% at all intersections and by 27% at rural intersections.
Improved lighting at intersections	Reduce nighttime crashes on rural and urban highways by 28%
Improved lighting, markings and signalization at crosswalks	Reduce pedestrian injury crashes by 40%
Improved signage and lane markings at curves	Reduce non-intersection fatal and injury crashes by 16%
Pavement friction management	Reduce intersection crashes by 20%
Retroreflective backplates on traffic signals	Reduce crashes by 15%
Roundabouts	Reduce fatal and injury crashes by 82%
Sidewalks	Reduce crashes involving pedestrians walking along the roadways by 65-89%
Wider edge lanes	Reduce fatal and injury crashes on rural two-lane roads by 37%

Source: USDOT

WORK ZONE SAFETY

From 2020 to 2024, crashes in U.S. highway work zones resulted in 4,481 fatalities, increasing slightly from decreasing slightly from 863 in 2020 to 850 in 2024, after increasing to 961 in 2021.²⁶ The report [Appendix](#) includes the number of work zone fatalities in each state and nationwide from 2020 to 2024.

The safe and efficient movement of vehicles through roadway work zones is a critical priority for transportation officials, the highway construction industry, police agencies, commercial motor carriers and the public. The Federal Highway Administration [Work Zone Management Program](#) strives to provide transportation practitioners with high-quality products, tools, and information to assist in planning, designing, and implementing safer, more efficient, and less congested work zones

Consistent with the Safe System approach, safety at highway work zones can be improved by implementing a [comprehensive work zone safety strategy](#) that includes ensuring a proper work zone layout, prioritizing work zone safety training, ensuring the use of high visibility safety apparel and appropriate traffic control devices, creating an internal traffic control plan and implementing strategies to reduce aggressive driving.



FUNDING HIGHWAY SAFETY IMPROVEMENTS

Increasing investment in roadway safety improvements is likely to result in reduced fatal and serious traffic crashes. The U.S. has a \$146 billion backlog in needed roadway safety improvements, according to a 2017 [report](#) from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. The report found implementing cost-effective and needed roadway safety improvements on U.S. roadways would save approximately 63,700 lives and reduce the number of serious injuries as a result of traffic crashes by approximately 350,000 over a 20-year period.

Additional funding for improved roadway safety has been provided by the bipartisan [Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act](#) (IIJA), which was signed into law in November 2021, and provides a significant boost in federal investment in roads, bridges and transit, and offers an opportunity for the nation to make progress in improving the safety, reliability and condition of America's transportation system. The IIJA provided \$454 billion over the five-year period from 2022 to 2026 for investment in highways and transit, resulting in a 38 percent increase in federal investment starting in 2022.²⁷ The IIJA was set to expire on September 30, 2026 but has been extended until December 11, 2026.

The IIJA provided additional resources to address traffic safety, including the following programs: \$6 billion for the Safe Streets and Roads for All program; \$17 billion for the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP); \$4 billion for improved crash data and vehicle, behavior, and truck safety programs; \$300 million for rural road safety; and \$120 million for tribal road safety.²⁸

The benefit of increased traffic safety funding provided by the IIJA has been reduced by the impact of inflation in highway construction costs. The Federal Highway Administration's national highway construction cost index, which measures labor and materials cost, increased by 48 percent from the start of 2022 through the end of 2025.²⁹

CONCLUSION

America faces a roadway safety crisis, with motorist, motorcyclist, pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities in 2025 at a level higher than a decade ago. The tremendous toll of fatalities and serious injuries that occur on the nation's roadways are a significant economic and, more critically, personal burden on Americans.

Addressing the nation's traffic safety challenge will require a comprehensive approach based on a belief that deaths and serious injuries on our roadways are unacceptable, and that people will make mistakes, but those mistakes should not lead to death or serious injury. Making a commitment to eliminating fatal and serious injuries on the nation's roadways will require robust investment and coordinated activities by transportation and safety-related agencies in providing the needed layers of protection for the nation's motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists, including safe road users, safe roads, safe vehicles, safe speeds and high-quality post-crash care.

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ENDNOTES

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- ⁹ [Ibid.](#)
- ¹⁰ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (2025). [Early Estimates of Motor Vehicle Traffic Fatalities and Fatality Rate by Sub-Categories in 2025](#) and TRIP analysis of NHTSA data.
- ¹¹ TRIP analysis of Federal Highway and National Highway Traffic Safety Administration data (2025). Charts VM-1 [Early Estimates of Motor Vehicle Traffic Fatalities and Fatality Rate by Sub-Categories in 2025](#) <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/policyinformation/statistics/2024/>
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