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151 people died on Oregon roads this summer. Here's what's behind it

Katie Livermore, Salem Statesman Journal | October 31, 2026



There are more people taking vacations, driving longer distances and traveling on unfamiliar roads in the summers which increases risk of traffic deaths, according to Mindy McCartt, spokesperson for the Oregon Department of Transportation.

The Salem area had a notable decrease in traffic deaths this summer, continuing a trend from 2025, according to a Statesman Journal analysis of Oregon Department of Transportation data.

Polk County saw an 80% drop in year-over-year summertime fatal crashes. Marion County traffic deaths also decreased by 20% from summer 2025. Nearly two-thirds of these deaths happened within Salem city limits, according to ODOT.

Oregon recorded 151 traffic deaths this summer, with speeding, impaired driving and distraction among the deadliest factors.

The period between Memorial Day and Labor Day is widely considered the "100 deadliest days" for drivers and Oregon typically sees an average of 150 fatalities per summer.

The Statesman Journal requested data on all crashes from the last six summers through a public records request. Preliminary data from 2026 is only available for fatal crashes and has not been finalized.

Here's what an analysis of the data found.

Why traffic deaths are higher in the summer

Summer is one of the busiest seasons for travel each year, according to Mindy McCartt, public information officer at ODOT.

There are more people taking vacations, driving longer distances and traveling on unfamiliar roads, McCartt said. There are also more people riding bicycles and motorcycles, walking and working in construction zones.

The time of year alone does not cause crashes, McCartt said. Instead, circumstances of each fatal crash are evaluated individually.

Multnomah County saw most traffic deaths, overall fatalities trending downward

Traffic fatalities across the state fell in 2025 for the fourth year in a row after they increased significantly with the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Crashes in Oregon caused more than 3,300 deaths from 2020 to 2025, according to TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit. Oregon was ranked 12th in the nation for highest number of traffic fatalities in 2025.

In summer 2025, the Willamette Valley and north coast saw more deadly crashes than any other region.

The highest number of deaths in 2026 occurred in Multnomah and Lane counties.

Marion County had eight fatalities this summer, according to ODOT preliminary data.

Five of the deaths occurred within Salem city limits, according to Salem Police Chief Brandon Ditto. The fatalities included two bicyclists, one motorcyclist, one pedestrian and one person in a vehicle.

"We have higher numbers of fatals with those category of vehicles or pedestrians," Ditto said. "They just aren't as well protected as a vehicle."

This year, Multnomah County had 27 deaths, followed by Lane County with 17.

Wheeler, Gilliam and Wallowa counties had the lowest number of deaths the past six years.

Teens are the highest risk age group for fatal crashes when school is out in the summer, ODOT said. The leading factor is speed.

This summer, there were 17 deaths in the 19 to 24 age group and eight deaths in the 13 to 18 age group, ODOT data shows.

Causes of fatal crashes

Fatal crashes rarely have a single cause, McCartt said.

Driving under the influence is a factor in many traffic fatalities, according to Marion County Sheriff's Office Sgt. Mark Ferron, who supervises the Traffic Safety Team.

In the summer, the Marion County Sheriff's Office sees more drivers coming home from parties and days on the water after drinking alcohol. They typically see a mix of alcohol, marijuana or combination of drugs, Ferron said.

Alcohol-involved crashes increased by 2% from 2020 to 2024, national data from NHTSA shows.

Of the 149 deaths on Oregon roads in the summer of 2025, 110 involved an impaired driver, ODOT data shows.

If someone suspects they see an intoxicated driver, they should keep their distance and call 911 if it's safe to do so, according to Oregon State Police.

The caller is expected to provide the vehicle make, model, color and license plate if visible. They will also need to share the direction of travel and location of the vehicle, OSP said.

Signs of an impaired driver include weaving, speeding, random stopping or braking, OSP said.

There were 17 confirmed fatalities that involved alcohol or drugs in 2026, ODOT preliminary data shows. There are 127 fatalities still under investigation.

Ferron's team has seen more fatalities involving cellphones over the last two years.

"We are getting people watching TV, watching movies, watching podcasts, as they're driving down the road," Ferron said. "One in particular, out on Mill Creek (Road SE), fatal crash early in the morning, the YouTube video was still playing in the car as he was lying there dead."

Drivers under 18 are prohibited from using a cellphone, even hands-free, for any purpose while driving, ODOT said.

Activities such as eating are also a common distraction for drivers, Ditto said. He's even seen people drive with a full plate of food in their lap.

Speed is another fatal factor, Ferron said. His team sees an increase in speeding when the seasons begin to change in May.

"People are getting that nice warm weather, dry roads, and they're ready for summer," Ferron said.

Ferron's team sees higher speeds in rural areas where there are longer roads to pick up the pace.

NHTSA found the number of people killed by speed-related crashes decreased by 11% from 2020 to 2025.

Ferron's team has also seen more people neglecting to wear their seatbelts over the past two years.

There have been several fatal crashes where the person died in a survivable crash but weren't wearing their seatbelt, Ferron said. Oftentimes, they are forced into the steering wheel or they get ejected out of the sunroof or side window in a crash.

In most of these cases, it was the driver who wasn't wearing a seatbelt, Ferron said.

NHTSA found the number of unrestrained occupants in passenger vehicles killed in the U.S. decreased by 21% from 2020 to 2025, down from about 12,400.

Impatience is another factor that can lead to fatal crashes, Ferron said.

“I just associate being selfish in a lot of these cases,” Ferron said. “You get somebody who just flies past you or makes those dangerous passes or those crazy lane changes.”

Law enforcement agencies investigate individual crashes and determine whether citations or criminal charges are appropriate.

Why do urban areas see higher numbers of fatalities?

Oregon data shows a higher number of traffic fatalities in urban areas compared to rural roads in summer 2026, with Multnomah County leading in number of deaths.

In bigger cities, Marion County Sheriff’s Office sees more vehicles striking pedestrians.

Over the summer, 21 fatal crashes in Oregon involved a pedestrian.

A Salem-Keizer Public Schools teacher struck two pedestrians on the sidewalk on 17th Street NE in August in an alleged hit-and-run. A 32-year-old woman died from injuries sustained in the crash.

Many times, drivers hit a person crossing the road late at night wearing dark-colored clothing, Ferron said. Often, it’s a person who is homeless and may not be using a crosswalk.

Kids are another victim of fatalities because they are smaller and may run out into the road quickly, Ferron said.

More people are driving SUVs, light-duty trucks and vans on the road. The number grew from about half the country's market share to three-quarters between 2012 and 2021, according to a report from City of Portland.

Larger vehicles have exponentially greater impact force compared to smaller vehicles, the report said.

How Polk County reduced fatal crashes

The Polk County Sheriff's Office dedicated more time to traffic enforcement in 2026 after seeing more traffic fatalities in years prior, Sheriff Mark Garton said. The county saw five fatal crashes in 2024 and another five in 2025, according to ODOT data.

Every day, mainly during rush hour, the sheriff's office turns its focus on traffic in areas where it's seen more complaints or incidents, Garton said.

An ODOT grant funded sheriff's deputies for increased traffic patrol this year, which also may have contributed to safer streets, according to Garton.

How does ODOT work to keep travelers safe?

ODOT identifies safety needs for locations using crash data and engineering analysis, McCartt said.

These improvements include median and roadside barriers, new signs and pavement markings, rumble strips, pedestrian and bicycle facilities, better lighting and highway design.

The investments are designed to prevent crashes or reduce their severity, McCartt said.

The agency works with law enforcement agencies, emergency responders, local governments and community organizations.

The Salem Police Department and Marion County Sheriff’s Office have traffic teams that focus on patrol at strategic locations.

To protect pedestrians, police adjust traffic signals to allow pedestrians to walk before the light turns green so they are more visible to cars, Ditto, the Salem police chief, said.

ODOT's Transportation Safety Office supports education, outreach and grant-funded programs addressing risks such as impaired driving, speeding, distraction and not using seatbelts, McCartt said.

How people can protect themselves on Oregon roads

ODOT officials recommend wearing a seatbelt, making sure children are properly restrained, putting phones and other distractions away, following posted speeds and slowing down for traffic, visibility, weather and road conditions.

The agency said to never drive impaired. Instead, drivers should arrange for a sober driver or another way home.

Drivers should get enough rest before a long trip and take breaks when needed, check tires, lights, brakes, fluids and TripCheck.com before traveling, ODOT said.

The agency also says to watch for people walking, biking and riding motorcycles and slow down and give workers and emergency responders extra space.

Rainy weather brings its own challenges as fall approaches

In the fall, roads slicken with wet weather and leaves, Ferron said.

Ferron recommends slowing down, leaving plenty of space for the vehicle ahead, keeping headlights on and making sure vehicles have good tire traction.

“Drive with your headlights on, especially if it’s raining,” Ferron said. “It’s not necessarily for you to see better, but it’s for other people to be able to see you.”

Drivers should also watch for hydroplaning, which is more common if tires are worn, ODOT said.

If a driver starts to hydroplane, they should ease off the gas, gently apply the brakes and steer straight ahead, according to ODOT.

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