

Americans Drove Far Less In 2020... So Why Were Road Deaths Up?

If there was any expected silver lining to the challenges of 2020, it surely would have been a drop in fatal car accidents. With people staying at home and thus off the road due to stay-at-home orders, business closures, and social distancing, surely there would be a corresponding drop in road deaths, right?

Unfortunately, that's not the case at all. Despite a 13% drop in miles driven, the number of traffic fatalities actually *increased* by 8% from 2019 to 2020, according to the [National Safety Council](#) (NSC). This was the highest year-over-year jump in fatalities since 1924.

According to the NSC data, the mileage death rate (that is, the number of deaths per mile traveled) increased by an estimated 24%. In other words, even with significantly fewer cars on American roads, they became far more dangerous.

A reduction in driving may not have been a reduction in dangerous drivers

Why did this happen? In one illuminating letter, the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration \(NHTSA\)](#) stated that during the pandemic, "fewer Americans drove, but those who did took more risks and had more fatal crashes." It may be the case that those who chose to stay on the road may have been risk-takers more generally, whereas the motorists who stayed home were naturally risk-averse people who would be less likely to cause accidents regardless. Still, that alone can't explain an *increase* in the number of fatal accidents; after all, those risk-takers were on the road before the pandemic, too.

Speeding seems to be a major contributing factor. As the Governors Highway Safety Association pointed out, early in the pandemic, when the most severe stay-at-home orders were in place and the most businesses were closed, those drivers who were still on the road found wide-open roadways and drove faster – in some cases, *much* faster. In Minnesota, for instance, the number of tickets issued by the State Patrol to drivers for going over 100 mph more than doubled from 2019 to 2020, according to [USA Today](#).

Those habits persisted even as traffic volumes increased. With some motorists already in the habit of driving at unsafe speeds, others may have increased their speed as well to keep up. Moreover, there was a significant decrease in traffic enforcement during the pandemic – so motorists thought they could speed and get away with it. Overall, the NHTSA found a 22% increase in vehicle speeds in some major metropolitan areas compared to pre-pandemic speeds.

This trend was incredibly dangerous for two reasons. First, at higher speeds, drivers have less time to react to obstacles and are more likely to lose control of their vehicles if they have to suddenly brake or swerve, leading to an increased risk of a collision. Second, crashes that happen at higher speeds have a greater risk of causing severe or fatal injury because of the amount of force involved.

The NHTSA's research also found, based on testing of trauma center patients who had been involved in serious crashes, that there was an increased rate of crashes involving alcohol and drug use. Distracted driving, too, may have played a role: as people became more reliant on technology to stay connected with friends and family, usage of electronics behind the wheel may have increased as well.

These trends put a point on the need for accountability

There's really only one way to look at these numbers: in the midst of all the (understandable) focus on the public health crisis caused by COVID-19, we as a society took our eye off the ball with regard to the public health crisis that is road safety. Years of progress were rolled back – the 2020 numbers are the worst since 2007 – and if we're not careful, those trends will continue.

As life settles into a post-pandemic "new normal," renewed emphasis needs to be placed on awareness campaigns for road safety if we are to reverse this increase in traffic fatalities. Motorists need to understand the risks of distracted, drunk, and drowsy driving. Traffic enforcement needs to be stepped up. We need to take a fresh look at both traffic laws and physical infrastructure to continue the work of making our roads safer.

Finally, the increase in road deaths highlights why it's so important to hold negligent drivers accountable. The progress we've made towards making our roads safer is fragile, and advocates for the injured play an important role in preserving and advancing that progress. If you've been injured by another driver's negligence, we urge you to speak with an experienced attorney in your area who can take legal action to protect your rights.

[Smith & Hassler](#) is a plaintiff's personal injury law firm based in Houston, Texas. If you've been injured, [contact us](#) today for a free consultation.