

# More cars on the road, and more distracted drivers, lead to a jump in U.S. traffic deaths

Mary Wisniewski Chicago Tribune

May 28, 2018

**The United States is leading the world in increased traffic deaths, and distracted driving is a primary cause, according to a new study of 29 nations.**

**Only 5 of 29 countries saw a jump in traffic deaths between 2010 and 2016, and the U.S. had the highest rate of increase at 13.5 percent, said a study by the International Transport Forum, which had its annual summit in Leipzig, Germany, last week. Argentina had the second-highest increase in traffic deaths, at 9 percent, and Chile experienced a 5 percent increase**

**The United States also saw the highest jump in pedestrian deaths during the time period, at 39.2 percent, and a 34.8 percent increase in cyclist deaths. In contrast, Norway saw a 37.5 percent drop in pedestrian deaths during this same period, while Israel saw cyclist deaths cut in half.**

**The increase in deaths in the United States appears to be tied to two main factors — more cars on the road due to a better economy, and distracted driving, said Fred Wegman, chair of the International Road Traffic Data and Analysis Group, a division of the Transport Forum.**

**“Distracted driving is more prevalent and prominent in the United States than in other countries,” said Wegman.**

**The study found the United States also had one of the highest rates of road deaths per capita, with 11.6 out of 100,000 people losing their lives to motor vehicle crashes, compared with rates of 2 to 5 deaths per 100,000 in countries such as the United Kingdom, Israel, Japan, Germany, Spain and Australia.**

**Starting with Sweden, many nations and municipalities in the past two decades have committed to a Vision Zero strategy for reducing traffic deaths and serious crashes. More than two dozen U.S. cities, including Chicago, have also agreed to a Vision Zero program. The initiative tries various ways of reducing deaths, including designing safer roads, greater enforcement and education.**

**Worldwide, traffic fatalities in 2016 were down 3.6 percent compared with 2010. If the United States, with its large population, were excluded from this statistic, the decrease in deaths would be nearly 15 percent, the study found. Preliminary data also showed deaths were down in all countries studied in 2017, the study said.**

**However, while the number of deaths worldwide has continued to fall, it has gone down at a slower rate in recent years, the study found. Four factors could explain this: the economic recovery, which puts more cars on the road; the increased popularity of cycling, associated with higher numbers of cycling deaths; slacker enforcement of traffic laws due a shift in police force priorities; and the rise in distracted driving, the study said.**

**Derek Kan, the U.S. undersecretary of transportation for policy, said the United States started a safety data initiative last year to predict and better understand what causes traffic fatalities.**

**“What does the data tell us — are there specific intersections, are there specific weather conditions, specific events where we see a spike in traffic fatalities?” Kan said in an interview at the International Transport Forum summit. He said the U.S. is working with local police and state transportation departments to examine causes.**

**Kan said the U.S. also wants to know just how significant distracted driving is as an issue in traffic deaths — the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found that the number of crashes due to texting or talking on mobile devices actually fell in 2016.**

**“Is there a measurement error?” Kan said. “Maybe we’re not capturing this data correctly.”**

**As for the spike in pedestrian deaths, Kan said the U.S. is examining whether that is because people are walking more, or more people are walking while distracted, or other reasons.**

**Kan noted that fatalities in the U.S. differ widely by region — while only 19 percent of Americans live in rural regions, those areas see 50 percent of traffic deaths. This runs contrary to the stereotype of the peaceful country road.**

**“You have this massive disproportion ... the risk of having a fatal traffic accident is so much greater in rural areas,” said Kan.**