

# Why Traffic Deaths Decreased in 2023 But Remain High



By Tony Rached

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In a world that's always on the move, the roads we travel on tell stories of our times, our decisions, and the unforeseen circumstances that unfold. The COVID-19 pandemic, an epoch-marking event, altered these narratives in ways both expected and surprising. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) has recently shed light on these changes, revealing a twist in the tale of traffic fatalities. While there's a glimmer of hope with a drop in traffic deaths in 2023, a shadow looms over this progress, reminding us that we're still veering off the safer path of pre-pandemic years. Join us as we delve into the numbers, the reasons behind them, and what it means for every pedestrian, cyclist, and driver on the road.



### The Paradox of Empty Roads and Rising Fatalities

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As the pandemic shuttered businesses and homes became offices, the streets lay bare, creating a paradoxical scenario. Initially, it seemed like a pause button had been hit on the hustle of daily commutes, but this emptiness brought about its own set of challenges. The allure of open roads led to a spike in reckless driving behaviors, with speeding becoming an adrenaline-fueled pastime for many. This dangerous cocktail of speed and abandon led to a startling increase in traffic fatalities, peaking at 42,915 in 2021 despite the reduced number of vehicles on the road.

## The Latest Numbers: A Glimpse of Hope Amid Concern

### The Decline and Its Discontents

In a recent turn of events, the NHTSA's data for 2023 brings a mix of relief and concern. Traffic deaths saw a 3.6% decline to 40,990 from 2022's figures. However, this silver lining is clouded by the fact that these numbers still surpass any pre-pandemic year since 2008. The culprits? A lethal mix of intoxicated driving, disregard for speed limits, and the negligence of seatbelt use.

### The Unseen Victims: Pedestrians and Cyclists

While drivers faced increased risks, those outside the vehicles bore the brunt even more starkly. The year 2022 was particularly grim for pedestrians and cyclists, witnessing the highest fatalities since the early '80s. The elderly demographic wasn't spared either, with a noticeable uptick in fatalities among drivers aged 65 or older.

### The Campaign Against Distraction

In response to these troubling trends, the NHTSA launched the "Put the Phone Away or Pay" campaign, targeting the epidemic of distracted driving. With over 3,000 lives claimed by this preventable cause in 2022 alone, the campaign underscores the high stakes of taking eyes off the road, even for a moment.

## A Closer Look: The Data Tells the Story

Let's break down the numbers to understand the landscape better:

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- **Total Traffic Deaths:** Decreased by 3.6% in 2023 to 40,990.
- **Pedestrian Fatalities:** Rose to 7,522 in 2022, the most since 1981.
- **Cyclist Fatalities:** Increased to 1,105 in 2022, the highest since 1980.
- **Elderly Driver Fatalities:** Climbed 4.7% to 7,870 in 2022, a record since 1975.
- **Distracted Driving Fatalities:** 621 lives lost in 2022 due to distraction-related crashes.

### Conclusion: The Road Ahead

While the decline in traffic fatalities in 2023 offers a beacon of hope, the journey towards safer roads is far from over. The persistence of high fatality rates, especially among the most vulnerable road users, signals a need for collective action and personal responsibility. The "Put the Phone Away or Pay" campaign is a step in the right direction, emphasizing the power of awareness and prevention. As we navigate the roads post-pandemic, let's pledge to drive not just for our destination but for the safety of all who share the journey. Together, we can turn the tide and pave the way for a safer tomorrow on the streets that connect us all.