

## The Road to Zero

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Earlier this month, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) [reported](#) an estimated 10 percent increase in traffic fatalities for the first six months of 2016. NHTSA's report was based on a statistical projection using data gathered, some of it in real time, from all 50 states. The increase is part of a trend. NHTSA reports that the second quarter of 2016 is "the seventh consecutive quarter with increases in fatalities as compared to corresponding quarters in previous years." NHTSA said it was too early to identify a cause for the most recent uptick, but that hasn't prevented safety advocates from working toward a solution.

Before we get to potential solutions, let's consider what happened last year.

**A decade of improvement was significantly eroded in 2015.** NHTSA's October report was presaged by the [overview of 2015 crash data](#) that it published in August. Last year, traffic fatalities nationwide increased by 7.2 percent. That is the largest percentage increase in nearly 50 years, since the 8.1 percent increase from 1965 to 1966. To put that in perspective, NHTSA noted that the 2015 increase reduced a "decade-long downward trend [in traffic deaths] of almost 25 percent . . . by almost one-third." In North Carolina, 95 more people were killed in 2015 traffic crashes than in 2014 crashes, an increase of 7.4 percent.

**2015 fatalities.** NHTSA reported that in 2015 all categories of occupant and nonoccupant fatalities increased from the previous year.

- Passenger vehicle occupant fatalities increased by 6.6 percent.
- Motorcyclist fatalities increased by 8.3 percent.
- Pedestrian fatalities increased by 9.5 percent.
- Pedalcyclist fatalities increased by 12.2 percent.

**DWI fatalities increased too.** Nationally, alcohol-impaired-driving fatalities increased by 3.2 percent in 2015 and accounted for 29 percent of the overall fatalities. In North Carolina, 48 more people died in alcohol-impaired driving fatalities in 2015, an increase of 13.2 percent from the previous year.

**And more people were injured.** NHTSA reported that in 2015 105,000 more people were injured in motor vehicle crashes than in 2014, an increase of 4.5 percent.

**The rise in deaths and injuries can't be solely explained by an increase in driving.** While vehicle miles traveled increased by 3.5 percent from 2014 to 2015, the largest increase since 1992, the fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled also increased: from 1.08 in 2014 to 1.12 in 2015.

**What can be done about it?**

**Road to Zero.** Shortly after NHTSA released its October report, the United States Department of Transportation (DOT) and the National Safety Council launched the [Road to Zero Coalition](#), aimed at eliminating fatalities on the nation's roads within the next 30 years. For its part, the DOT has committed \$1 million a year for three years for grants to organizations "working on lifesaving programs."

The coalition says its initial focus will be on promoting proven strategies for saving lives such as "seat belt use, rumble strips, truck safety, behavior change campaigns and data-driven enforcement." But the group's overall vision is broader. Advances in technology and automated vehicles will play a key role as the coalition seeks ways "to ensure that inevitable human mistakes do not result in fatalities."

**Self-driving cars.** Last month, the DOT [announced a 15-point safety standard](#) to govern automakers' development of automated vehicle technologies. Transportation Secretary Anthony Foxx said that "[a]utomated vehicles have the potential to save thousands of lives, driving the single biggest leap in road safety that our country has ever taken." NHTSA Administrator Mark Rosekind said that automated technologies held "enormous promise," given that "[n]inety-four percent of crashes on U.S. roadways are caused by human choice or error."

[DOT recommends](#) that states evaluate their current laws to address "unnecessary impediments to the safe testing, deployment, and operation of HAVs [highly automated vehicles] and update references to a human driver as appropriate." DOT recognizes that states may "wish to experiment with different policies and approaches to consistent standards, and in that way contribute to the development of the best approaches and policies to achieve consistent regulatory objectives." While state laws need not be identical, DOT encourages "sufficient consistency" to "avoid a patchwork of inconsistent State laws." To that end, DOT sets forth a model regulatory framework for states to regulate the testing, deployment and operation of autonomous vehicles. The Detroit Free Press reports [here](#) that the Michigan legislature is considering legislation "aimed at making Michigan a research center for the testing of autonomous vehicles."

In the meantime, if you find yourself in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, you can get today a lift in a [self-driving Uber](#). (Don't worry, there is an engineer sitting in the front seat – just in case.)

### **What can we do while we wait for the technology to save us?**

**Put your seatbelt on.** NHTSA [estimates](#) that the use of seatbelts in passenger vehicles in 2015 saved nearly 14,000 lives. Nearly 3,000 fewer people would have died in 2015 car crashes had they been buckled in.

**Wear a helmet.** NHTSA [estimates](#) that 1,772 lives were saved in 2015 by the use of motorcycle helmets. If all motorcyclists had been helmeted, an additional 740 people would have survived vehicle crashes.

**Put the phone down and pay attention.** Fatalities in distraction-affected crashes [increased by 8.8 percent in 2015](#). State and local governments continue to struggle with regulating drivers' use of electronic devices. The City Council for the District of Columbia is considering a bill that would raise the fine for drivers' use of handheld phones and that would require license suspension for a third offense in an 18-month period. But the Washington Post [reports](#) that, as with every other attempt to regulate this phenomenon, enforcement is the rub. The Post says that "[a]s things stand, the District's bill is not much more than a wish, a collectively voiced expression of frustration."

**End driving while impaired.** If I had the solution to this, I'd have led with it. Nevertheless, there are new approaches that show some promise.

**Smartphone breathalyzers.** Last summer, [the Colorado Department of Transportation \(CDOT\) distributed smartphone breathalyzers](#) to study participants in Denver. In exchange, the participants provided feedback about their experiences. CDOT reports that 84 percent of the participants agreed that owning a smartphone breathalyzer lowered their risk for driving while impaired. Nearly 80 percent of the participants believed that they might have driven while

above the 0.08 limit before receiving the breathalyzers, while only 12 percent reported that they may have driven impaired since receiving and using the devices.

**Built-in breath testing.** Here, too, advancing vehicle technology could be a boon. [The Driver Alcohol Detection System for Safety \(DADSS\)](#), a research partnership between NHTSA and the Automotive Coalition for Traffic Safety (ACTS), has developed early prototypes of in-vehicle based and touch-based alcohol detection systems that could be manufactured in motor vehicles. [DADSS showed off](#) the technology at the annual meeting of the Governors Highway Safety Association in August.

If you want a car with an integrated system now, you can buy a [Volvo equipped with Alcotest](#), a hand-held fuel cell breath testing device, [which can be set to detect whether the driver's breath alcohol concentration exceeds the legal limit](#). If it does, the car's engine will not start.

If you know of other developments or programs that I failed to mention, please use the comment feature to tell us about them.