



New York State Comptroller
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Economic and Policy Insights

Moving in the Wrong Direction

**Traffic Fatalities are Growing in
New York State**

June 2024

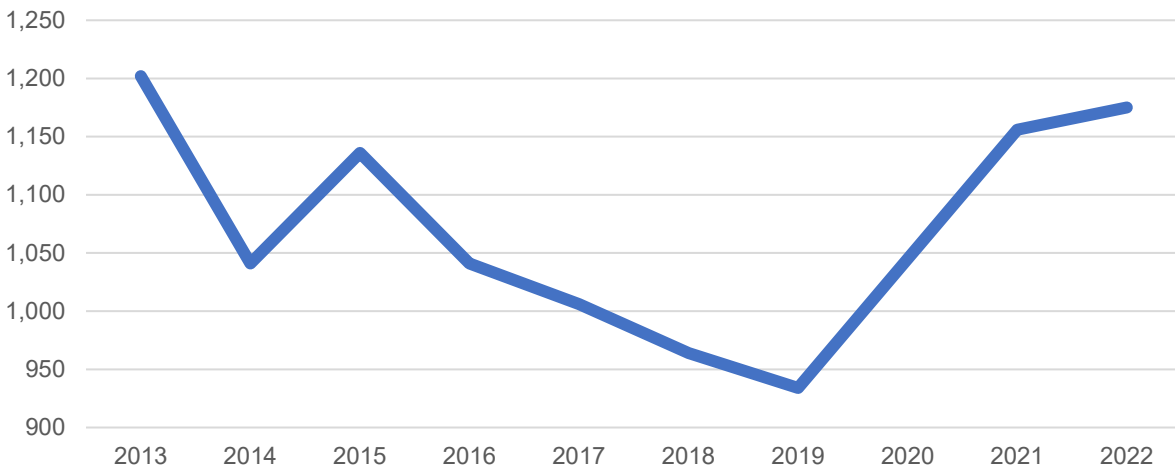
Introduction

Since 2019, motor vehicle fatalities in New York State have risen sharply, reversing the improvements made in the years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, 2022 fatalities in New York are at the highest level in a decade. Moreover, fatalities have grown even as the number of vehicle miles travelled, licensed drivers and traffic accidents in the State have declined. State lawmakers have taken action in recent years targeting dangerous driving behavior, most recently with the enactment of “Sammy’s Law,” which allows New York City to reduce speed limits in certain “safety zones” that are prone to pedestrian traffic injuries and fatalities. Such discretion could be provided to other local governments looking for ways to make their roads safer.

Traffic Fatalities Have Grown Since 2019

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, motor vehicle accidents are one of the leading causes of death in the nation.¹ In 2022, there were 1,175 motor vehicle fatalities in New York. As Figure 1 shows, this represents the highest number since 2013 and reverses a decline that had been occurring steadily since 2015. In New York and in the nation, the number of motor vehicle fatalities have grown sharply since 2019 – by nearly 17 percent nationally and by 25.8 percent in New York. Fatalities declined nationally in 2022 but continued to grow in New York.

Figure 1
Motor Vehicle Fatalities in New York, 2013-2022



Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

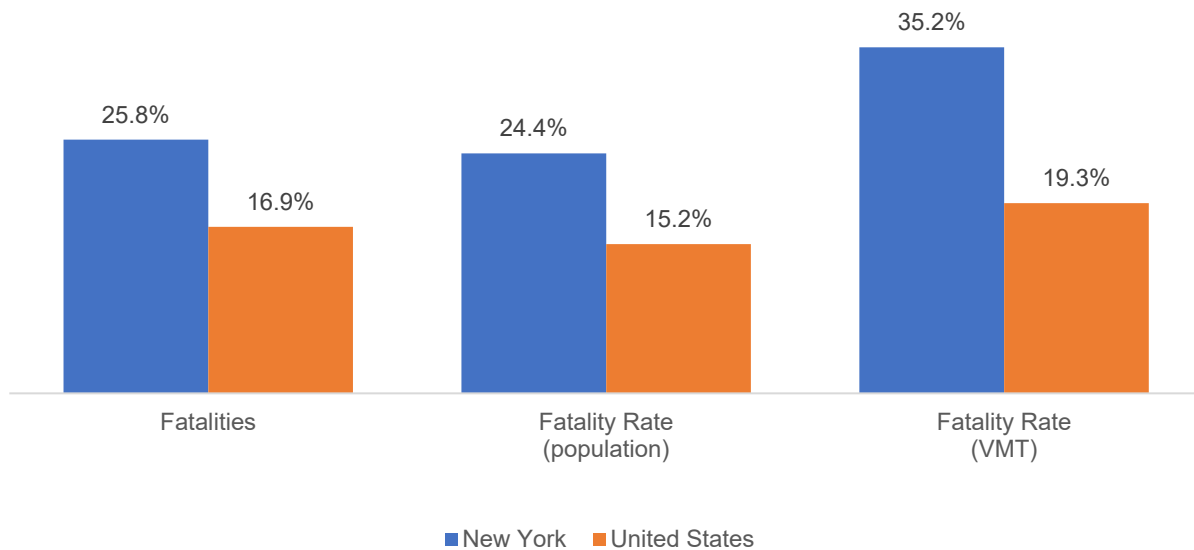
As shown in Figure 2, since 2019 the growth in New York’s traffic fatalities has occurred even as the number of licensed drivers and vehicle miles travelled (VMT) has declined by 1 percent and 7 percent, respectively. The number of traffic accidents in New York has also declined by 12.5 percent in this period.² And, as shown in Figure 3, the growth in fatalities has been greater than the national average even when adjusting for population size and VMT.

Figure 2
Licensed Drivers and Vehicle Miles Travelled, and Percent Change, 2019-2022

	New York 2019	New York 2022	New York Percent Change	U.S. Percent Change
Licensed Drivers	12,194,360	12,084,675	-0.9%	2.8%
Vehicle Miles Travelled (millions)	123,986	115,382	-6.9%	-2.0%

Source: U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics

Figure 3
Growth Rate in Fatalities and Fatality Rates, New York and United States, 2019-2022



Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

In 2022, New York ranked 11th in fatalities among all other states; large states such as California (4,513), Texas (4,500) and Florida (3,530) had the greatest number of fatalities. However, when adjusting fatalities for population and vehicle miles traveled, New York's ranking is more favorable. On a population-adjusted basis, New York's fatality rate was 5.97 for every 100,000 population, making it 3rd lowest among all other states and District of Columbia and half the national average of 12.76. On a vehicle-mile basis, the motor vehicle fatality rate in New York was 1.02 for every 100 million vehicle miles travelled (VMT), the 10th lowest rate among all other states and District of Columbia and lower than the national average (1.38).

Figure 4
Fatalities and Fatality Rates, New York, United States, and Similar States by Geography and Size, 2022

	Fatalities	Fatality Rate (per 100,000 population)	Fatality Rate (per 100 million VMT)
New York	1,175	5.97	1.02
U.S.	42,514	12.76	1.33
California	4,428	11.34	1.40
Texas	4,408	14.68	1.52
Florida	3,530	15.87	1.55
Illinois	1,268	10.08	1.22
Massachusetts	434	6.22	0.76
New Jersey	685	7.40	0.91
Pennsylvania	1,179	9.09	1.18
Vermont	76	11.74	1.07

Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Types of Fatalities in New York State

In 2022, three out of four vehicles involved in fatal crashes were passenger vehicles and light trucks, and more crashes occur on a freeway, expressway or other arterial road where posted speed limits are generally higher than on local roads.³ Most fatal car crashes occur on urban roadways, and the number of fatalities on urban roadways has increased 68 percent since 2017.⁴

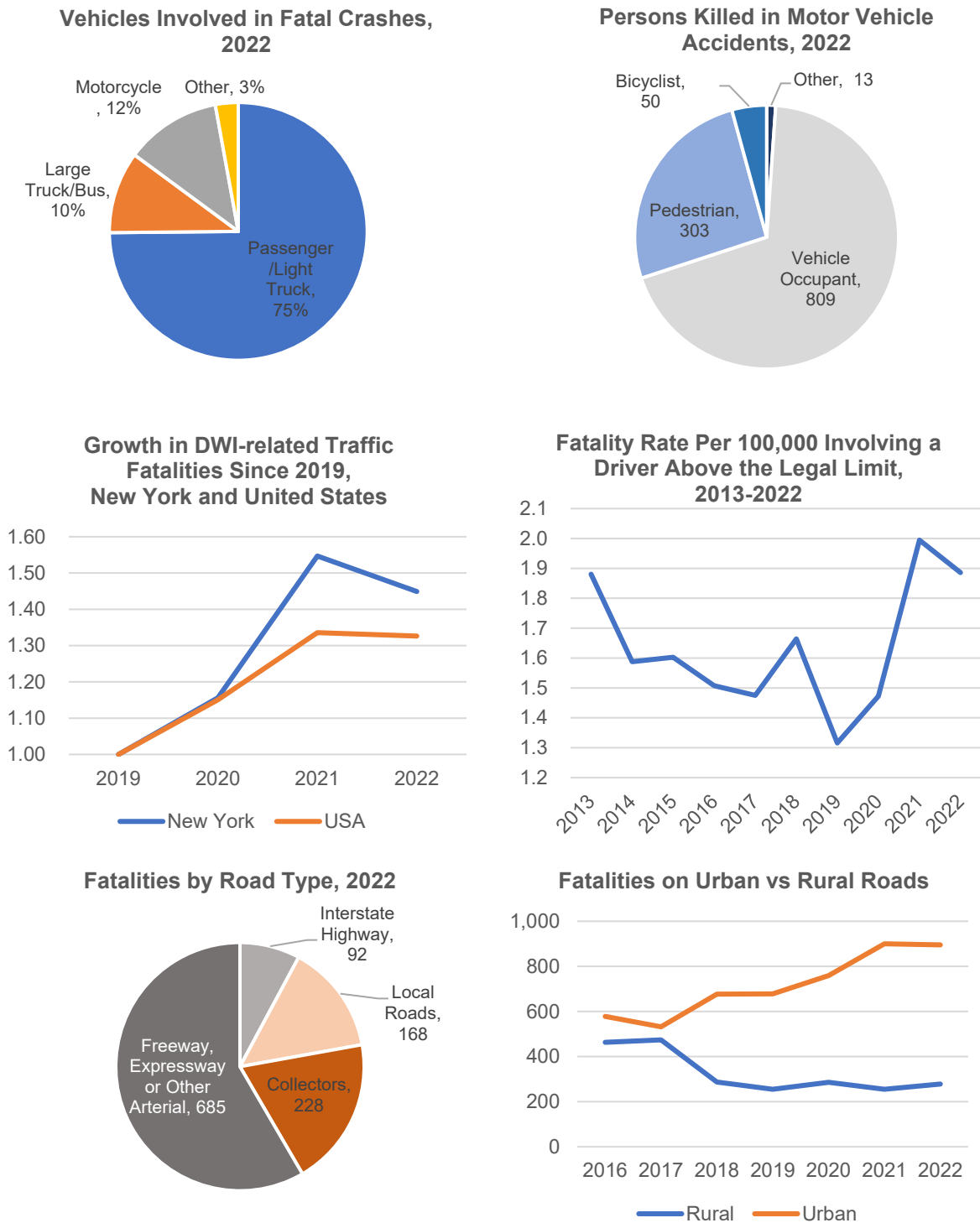
Most of those who die in traffic fatalities are in the vehicle. Overwhelmingly in fatal traffic accidents, occupants die when they are not wearing a restraint or helmet: In 2022, 64 percent of unrestrained and unhelmeted occupants involved in fatal accidents were killed.⁵

Of those who are not vehicle occupants, the overwhelming majority are pedestrians. New York has been consistently higher than the national average on this measure, with pedestrians being one-quarter of all crash fatalities in 2022, over 8 percentage points higher than the national average.

In 2022, about one-in-three fatalities in New York involved speeding (402 fatalities) and one-in-three involved a driver with a Blood Alcohol Content level (BAC) above the federal legal limit of .08 (371 fatalities), although there is overlap between these categories.⁶ From 2019 to 2022, there was a 45 percent increase in the number of fatalities involving drivers above the legal limit. This is 12 percentage points above the national average and 13th highest increase among all states and the District of Columbia.

The 2022 DWI fatality rate based on population is 43 percent higher than the rate in 2019, and on par with where it was in 2013. The rate declined from 1.99 to 1.89 per 100,000 people between 2021 and 2022, meaning 25 fewer people died that year.

Figure 5
Overview of Fatalities in New York State

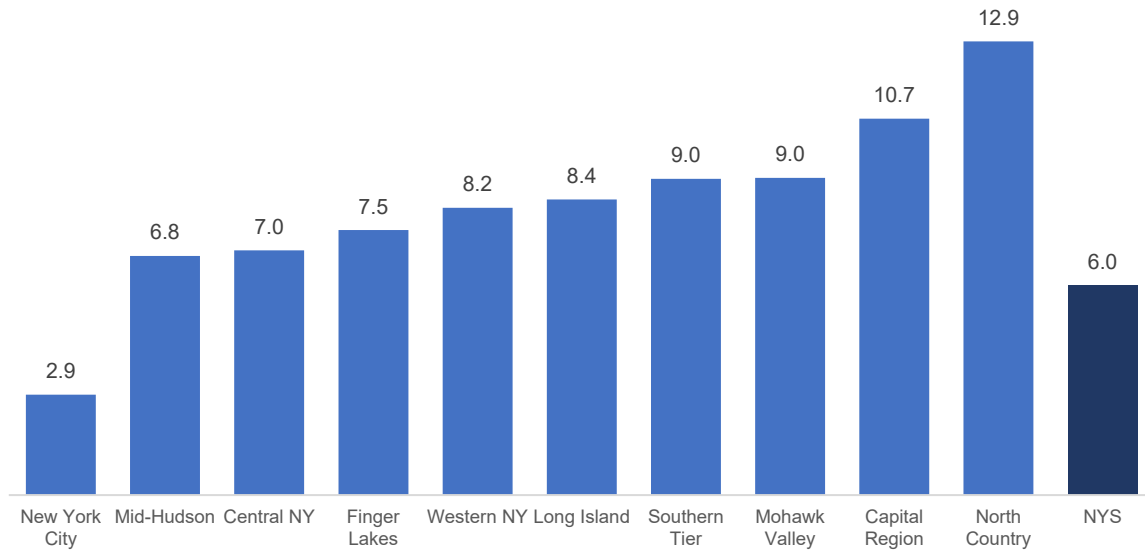


Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Fatalities by Region

The New York City Region had the lowest fatality rate at 2.9 per 100,000 people. New York City's low rate is likely a function of the high share of residents in New York City who do not own a vehicle; as the State's chief population center, the City brings down the statewide average. Every other region in the State had a greater fatality rate, likely reflecting a lower population density resulting in a greater reliance on vehicles and increased travel over freeways, expressways, and other higher speed arterials. Fatality rates on a VMT basis are not available on a county basis.

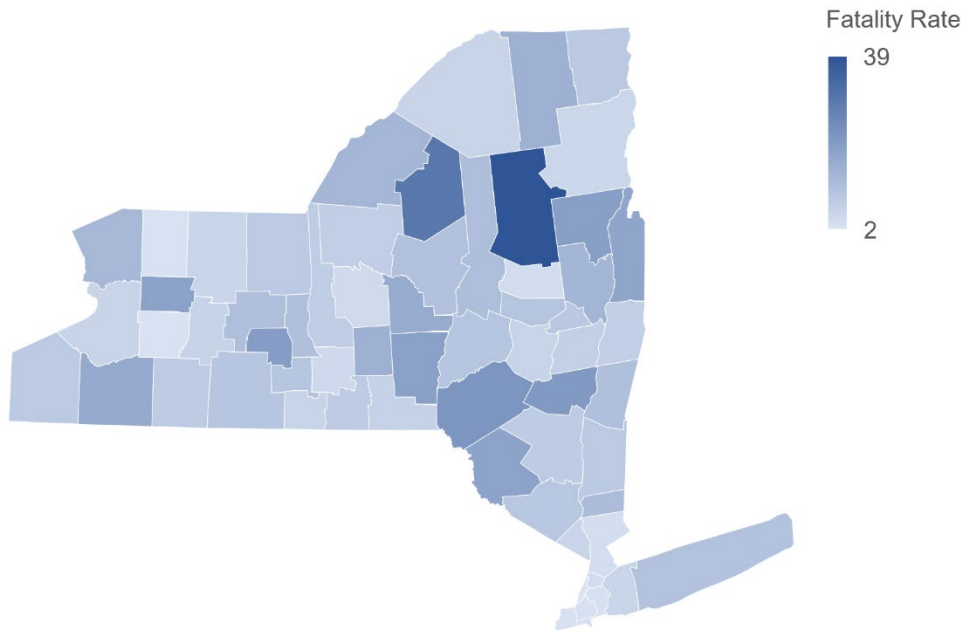
Figure 6
Fatality Rate by NYS Region Per 100,000 People, 2022



Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

In 2022, the number of fatalities were greatest on Long Island (164 in Suffolk and 81 in Nassau).⁷ The lowest number of fatalities occurred in Wyoming and Orleans Counties which each had one fatality. As shown in Figure 7, Hamilton and Lewis Counties had the highest fatality rate with 39 and 30 fatalities per 100,000 residents, respectively. In some less populated rural regions, the fatality rate may be higher but the number of fatalities may be relatively low; for example, there were 2 fatalities in Hamilton County in 2022.

Figure 7
Fatality Rates by NYS County, 2022

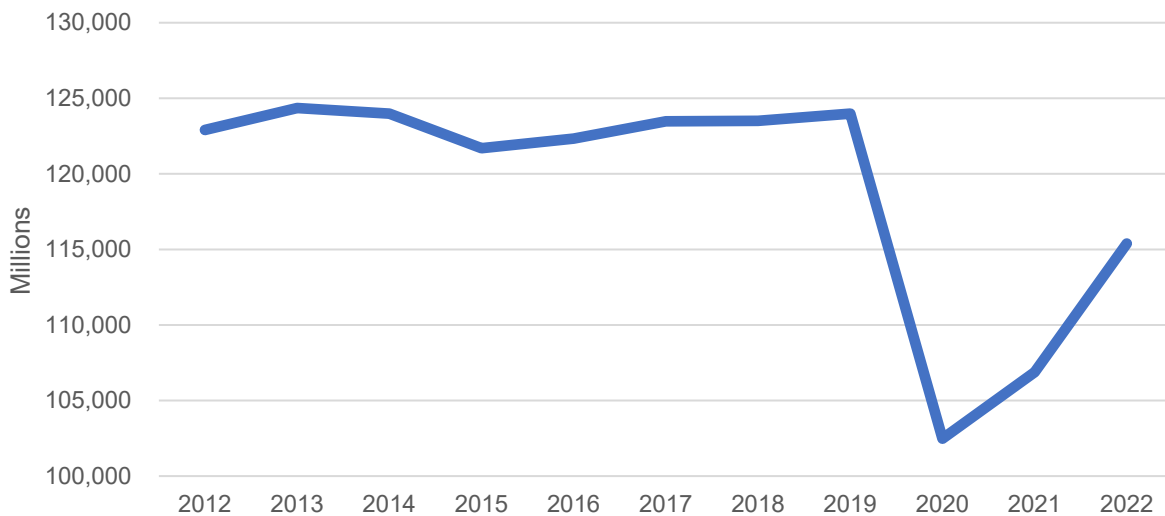


Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Monitoring Performance

Stay at home orders implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic reduced motor vehicle travel. In New York, from 2019 to 2020 VMT declined by over 17 percent, and still remained 7 percent below 2019 levels in 2022. Despite these declines, the frequency of fatal crashes has increased.

Figure 8
Vehicle Miles Traveled in New York, 2012 – 2022



Source: U.S. Department of Transportation

Much of the decline during the decades prior to the pandemic were largely from improvements in vehicle safety technologies and advancements in federal motor vehicle safety standards.⁸ The recent increase in fatal crashes and fatalities has been attributed to increased risks taken by drivers. Research from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) states, “After the declaration of the public health emergency in March 2020, driving patterns and behaviors in the U.S. changed significantly. Of the drivers who remained on the roads, some engaged in riskier behavior including speeding, failure to wear seat belts and driving under the influence...”⁹

A 2020 national survey of nearly 3,000 licensed active drivers conducted by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found that 60 percent of drivers surveyed had reduced their driving due to the COVID pandemic while 4 percent reported an increase in driving. Those who had increased driving reported higher rates of risky driving behavior, primarily speeding, but also texting, running red lights and changing lanes aggressively. According to the AAA, with less traffic on the road, “a driver’s perceptions of the risk and difficulty of the driving may have been reduced relative to typical pre-pandemic driving situations,” allowing them to be more comfortable performing more risk-increasing behaviors.¹⁰

Research has consistently found speeding, failure to wear seat belts, distracted driving and driving under the influence are key factors in increased traffic fatalities.¹¹ At the state and local level, research has shown that laws targeting driver behavior have been effective in lowering fatal motor vehicle crashes. Laws that lower minimum blood alcohol content (BAC) have been associated with some of the largest declines across all age groups.¹²

The NHTSA established a set of twelve core performance measures for each state to track, measure and report on annually.¹³ Each state's targets are based on their own state-specific methodology and program philosophy. In addition to annual reporting, states are required to provide quantifiable annual performance targets for each performance measure along with a justification for each performance target that explains why each target is appropriate and evidence based.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2018 and 2019, New York successfully met most of its core targets, as shown in Figure 9. In 2020, the State met just over half; in 2021 it only met one target. Performance improved in 2022, when the State met 3 out of 12 targets. Preliminary estimates for 2023 show a success rate of 17 percent.¹⁴

Figure 9
Federal Performance Measures Met by New York, 2018 to 2022

CORE PERFORMANCE MEASURES	2022			2021	2020	2019	2018
	Target	Actual	Target Met	Target Met	Target Met	Target Met	Target Met
Total Traffic Fatalities	1,005	1,006	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Serious Injuries in Traffic Crashes	11,174	11,146	Y	N	N	N	N
Fatalities per 100 Million VMT	0.82	0.86	N	N	N	Y	Y
Unrestrained Passenger Vehicle Occupant Fatalities	159.0	194.0	N	N	N	Y	Y
Fatalities Involving Alcohol-Impaired (BAC=.08+) Driver	294.4	270.4	Y	N	Y	Y	N
Speed-Related Fatalities	300.0	318.6	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Motorcyclist Fatalities	144.9	162.2	N	N	N	Y	Y
Unhelmeted Motorcyclist Fatalities	10.1	12.4	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Drivers Age 20 or Younger Involved in Fatal Crashes	93.9	94.0	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Pedestrian Fatalities	277.2	271.0	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Bicyclist and Other Cyclist Fatalities	39.0	45.4	N	N	N	N	Y
Percent of Observed Seat Belt Use in Vehicles	95.2%	91.9%	N	N	Y	Y	Y

Note: Y = Yes, target met; N = No, target not met.

Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

Government Efforts

Federal Government

The federal Infrastructure, Investment, and Jobs Act (IIJA) in 2021 provided \$454 billion over five years for investments in highways and transit.¹⁵ Of this, \$17 billion is for the Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP); \$6 billion was provided for the Safe Streets and Roads for All (SS4A) program; and \$300 million for rural road safety.¹⁶ New York has been apportioned nearly \$641 million for the HSIP over five years and state and local entities have been awarded over \$87 million for the SS4A program and nearly \$1 million for the Rural Surface Transportation Grant program.¹⁷

In 2022, the U.S. Department of Transportation launched the National Roadway Safety Strategy (NRSS) to reduce serious injuries and deaths on our highways, roads, and streets with the ambitious goal of reaching zero roadway fatalities. The Strategy has been adopted by many state and local transportation agencies including the New York State Department of Transportation, which included the system as part of the 2023 State Highway Safety Plan.¹⁸ NRSS focuses on five key objectives:¹⁹

- Safer People: Encourage safe, responsible behavior by drivers and create conditions that prioritize their ability to reach their destination unharmed.
- Safer Roads: Design roadway environments to mitigate human mistakes and account for injury tolerances to facilitate safe travel by the most vulnerable users.
- Safer Vehicles: Expand the availability of vehicle systems that help to prevent crashes and minimize the impact of crashes on both occupants and non-occupants.
- Safer Speeds: Promote safer speeds in all roadways through a combination of thoughtful roadway designs, targeted education and outreach campaigns, and enforcement.
- Post-Crash Care: Enhance the survivability of crashes through expedient access to emergency medical care, while creating a safe working environment for vital first responders and preventing secondary crashes through robust traffic incident management practices.

State Government

As part of the New York State Enacted Budget for State Fiscal Year 2024-25, the State enacted Sammy’s Law, which allows New York City to reduce its speed limit from 25 to 20 miles per hour and from 15 to 10 miles per hour in special traffic calming zones (slow zones). This legislation follows a series of bills that have been enacted over the past 10 years that have addressed different aspects of traffic safety including speeding, pedestrian and passenger safety, impaired driving, and seat belt use, as shown in Figure 10.

Figure 10
Enacted New York Traffic Safety Legislation

Chapter/ Year	Summary
Chapter 532 of 2023	Relates to paying drug-impaired driving surcharges to counties to reduce drug-impaired driving incidences
Chapter 496 of 2022	Changes the minimum speed limit in towns and villages from 30 to 25 miles per hour
Chapter 379 of 2022	Mandatory Pedestrian and Bicyclist Safety awareness education course as a requirement for pre-licensing
Chapter 136 of 2020	Changes the requirement for passengers over 16 years old to wear a seatbelt in any seat of the car instead of only in the front seat
Chapter 489 of 2017	Ruby's Law: Mandatory testing of breath, blood or urine in the event of a motor vehicle collision resulting in death or injury
Chapter 393 of 2017	Children under the age of 2 must be retained in a rear facing safety seat
Chapter 355 of 2017	Motorcycle safety awareness component as requirement for pre-licensing education
Chapter 239 of 2016	Tiffany Heitcamp's Law: requires a judge in a boating while intoxicated case to consider prior DWI offenses

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on traffic safety in New York. After 2020, New York did not meet the majority of its core federal performance targets. New federal funding through the IIJA, federal oversight and recent changes to State law have been advanced to help mitigate or eliminate traffic fatalities, and more can be done to raise awareness and tackle the problem at the State and local level.

Other states have advanced policies to improve traffic safety that New York could consider. For example, in 2017 Utah became the first state to lower their blood alcohol limit from the federal and NYS limit of .08 to .05. According to a 2022 study by NHTSA, Utah's change had a demonstrably positive impact on highway safety in the state. Fatal crashes and the fatality rate in Utah dropped by nearly 20 percent and 18 percent respectively in 2019, the first year the legal limit was changed.²⁰ A bill introduced in New York State in 2022, if enacted, would make New York the second state to implement the .05 BAC limit.²¹

The recent passage of Sammy's Law highlighted interest on the part of New York City to have greater control over its own speed limits. Policy makers should consider if allowing other local governments, not just New York City, to be able to make similar adjustments to their minimum speed limits would help reduce the number of traffic fatalities in the State.

Endnotes

- ¹ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, *Transportation Safety*, March 1, 2024 at <https://www.cdc.gov/transportationsafety/index.html>.
- ² Institute for Traffic Safety Management and Research (ITSMR), Traffic Safety Statistical Repository, <https://www.itsmr.org/traffic-safety-statistical-repository>.
- ³ U.S. Department of Transportation, Model Inventory of Roadway Elements Version 2.0, pgs. 26, 28 at <https://safety.fhwa.dot.gov/rsdp/downloads/fhwasa17048.pdf>; and *Manual on Traffic Controlled Devices for Streets and Highways*, 11th Edition, December 2023, pgs. 17, 18 at https://mutcd.fhwa.dot.gov/pdfs/11th_Edition/mutcd11thedition.pdf.
- ⁴ Urban roadways are defined by the U.S. Census based on population density. Any roadway that is not classified as being located in an urban area is classified as being in a rural area.
- ⁵ Unrestrained refers to seatbelt use by a motor vehicle occupant. Unhelmeted refers to helmet use by a motorcycle driver or passenger.
- ⁶ National Transportation Safety Board, *Safety Study: Reducing Speeding-Related Crashes Involving Passenger Vehicles*, pgs. 7, 15, <https://www.nts.gov/safety/safety-studies/documents/ss1701.pdf>.
- ⁷ In 2022, Suffolk County also had the highest number of fatal crashes involving a distracted driver; the highest number of fatal crashes involving speeding; the highest number of vehicle occupants killed without wearing restraints or helmets; and the highest number of fatalities involving a driver above the legal limit than any other County.
- ⁸ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, *Lives Saved by Vehicle Safety Technologies and Associated Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards, 1960 to 2012*, DOT HS 812 069, January 2015, pg.xii, at <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/812069.pdf>.
- ⁹ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, *Continuation of Research on Traffic Safety During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency*, DOT HS 813 210, October 2021.
- ¹⁰ Tefft, B.C., et.al. *Self-Reported Risky Driving in Relation to Changes in Amount of Driving During the COVID-19 Pandemic*, AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, 2022.
- ¹¹ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, *Continuation of Research on Traffic Safety During the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency*, DOT HS 813 210, October 2021.
- ¹² David M. Notricia, MD, et al, *The Impact of State Laws on Motor Vehicle Fatality Rates, 1999-2015*, *The Journal of Trauma and Acute Care Surgery*, June 2020, pgs. 760-769, at https://journals.lww.com/jtrauma/fulltext/2020/06000/the_impact_of_state_laws_on_motor_vehicle_fatality.8.aspx.
- ¹³ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, *State Performance Targets*, at <https://www.nhtsa.gov/highway-safety-grants-program/state-performance-targets>.
- ¹⁴ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, *New York FY 2023 Annual Report*, pgs. 18-19, at <https://www.nhtsa.gov/sites/nhtsa.gov/files/2024-05/NY%20FY23%20Annual%20Report-tag.pdf>.
- ¹⁵ TRIP, National Transportation Research Nonprofit, *Funding America's Transportation System*, March 2022, pg. 1, at <https://tripnet.org/reports/funding-americas-transportation-system-report-march-2022>.
- ¹⁶ TRIP, National Transportation Research Nonprofit, *Addressing America's Traffic Safety Crisis*, June 2023, at https://tripnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/TRIP_Addressing_Americas_Traffic_Safety_Crisis_Report_June_2023.pdf.
- ¹⁷ Federal Highway Administration, *Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, Funding, FY 2022-2026 Estimated Highway Apportionments under the BIL* at https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/bipartisan-infrastructure-law/docs/Est_FY_2022-2026_Apportions_Infrastructure.xlsx. U.S. Department of Transportation, *All Years' SS4A Grant Awards, Awarded Projects, 2022 & 2023 SS4A*, at <https://www.transportation.gov/grants/ss4a/fy22-all-funding-awards-by-state> and <https://www.transportation.gov/grants/ss4a/fy23-all-funding-awards-by-state>. U.S. Department of Transportation, *The Rural Surface Transportation Grant Program, 2023&2024 RSTP Awards and 2022 RSTP Awards*, at https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2023-12/Rural%20Fact%20Sheets%20FY%202023_2024_0.pdf and https://www.transportation.gov/sites/dot.gov/files/2022-12/Fact%20Sheets%20Rural%202022_0.pdf.

¹⁸ New York State Department of Transportation, *Strategic Highway Safety Plan 2023-2027*, at <https://www.dot.ny.gov/divisions/operating/osss/highway-repository/SHSP2023.pdf>.

¹⁹ U.S. Department of Transportation, *National Roadway Safety Strategy* at <https://www.transportation.gov/NRSS>.

²⁰ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, Evaluation of Utah's .05 BAC Per Se Law, DOT HS 813 234, February 2022.

²¹ S.776 and A.1627.

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