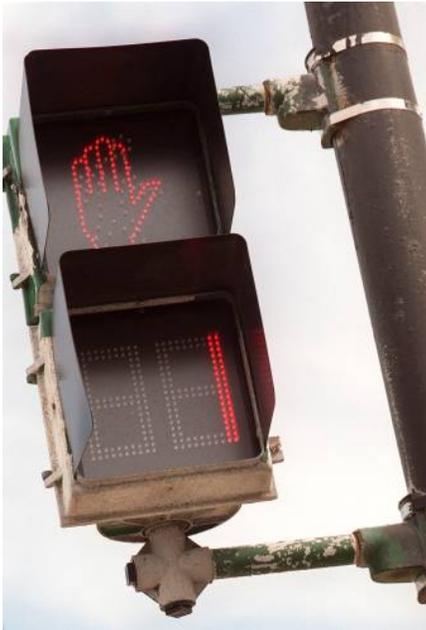


Editorial: Traffic fatalities continue to decline, while deaths of walkers and bicyclists hit a 28-year high



Last year the number of pedestrian deaths reached the highest level since 1990. (Peter Thompson/Chicago Tribune/TNS)

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The dark season is upon us again, and the terrors it holds are hardly confined to Halloween. Low visibility combined with the inclement weather that is surely just around the calendar corner in our part of the world pose increased traffic safety risks.

This reflection is prompted by statistics reported last week by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: More pedestrians and bicyclists were killed in 2018 than in any year since 1990, even as total traffic deaths decreased. The NHTSA said that 6,283 pedestrians were killed last year, an increase of 3.4% from 2017, while 857 bicyclists died, an increase of 6.3%. Combined, those two categories accounted for about 20% of all traffic deaths.

The agency also noted that the overall traffic safety picture has been improving for the past 40 years, as manufacturers have added features such as air bags and electronic stability control, and public awareness campaigns have led to increased seat belt use and decreased impaired driving.

So why are “outside of vehicle” fatalities spiking?

Experts interviewed by *The New York Times* pointed to the driving public’s taste for larger SUVs and trucks, which are more prone to running over pedestrians rather than throwing them up over the hood. This, combined with the heavier impact imparted during a collision and larger blind spots, may be contributing to more such deaths, they surmised.

This is not to mention the dangers inherent in distracted driving. About 3.2% of drivers on the road on a given day are using cellphones, according to the *Times*. (We also wonder about distracted walking, having seen on more than a couple of occasions in Hanover pedestrians who were blissfully unaware that they were straying out into traffic while using their phones.)

And, now, about that darkness, which poses special challenges to aging eyes, of which there are many in Vermont and New Hampshire. (The percentage of drivers 65 and older involved in fatal crashes has increased nearly 35% over 10 years.)

Nighttime fatalities involving pedestrians rose 4.6% from 2017 to 2018, while those involving bicyclists went up 9.2%. This may be an unfortunate side effect of an otherwise positive development: More people are walking and biking for health and environmental reasons, a trend certainly noticeable in the Upper Valley.

Something else that is quite evident to us is that reckless driving is spiking rapidly here. For instance, the morning commute on Interstate 89 often resembles nothing so much as the Wild West, combining high speed, immense pickup trucks and SUVs, unsignaled lane changes and a general aggression previously associated primarily with neighboring states to the south. If that kind of driving spills over to roads frequented by pedestrians and bicyclists, it constitutes a distinct menace to them.

So, drivers, on Halloween night, when children are more likely to be walking about than usual, be extra careful. And, then, resolve to drive in like fashion every subsequent night, and day, sharing the road safely with walkers and bicyclists. If you need a refresher on how to do that, the NHTSA website — <https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/pedestrian-safety> — has useful safety tips for both drivers and pedestrians, who also need to know how best to protect themselves from injury or death.