D.C.

Traffic fatalities have doubled since D.C.'s promise of zero

Thirty-three people have lost their lives in traffic crashes this year.

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Traffic moves along Interstate 295 in Washington earlier this month. The highway bisects some D.C. neighborhoods. (Craig Hudson for The Washington Post)

By Susie Webb and Rachel Weiner

A decade ago, incoming Mayor Muriel E. Bowser (D) pledged to eliminate traffic deaths and serious injuries in D.C. by 2024.

Instead, the number of fatalities has risen in all but two years since the initiative, dubbed "Vision Zero," was launched. A Washington Post analysis of city traffic data shows that D.C. is on track this year to match last year's 52 traffic deaths, which marked a 16-year high.

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D.C.'s Vision Zero plan has relied heavily on camera enforcement to catch speeders, who are more likely to cause dangerous crashes. But The Post found that of the 33 people killed in traffic crashes so far this year, nine died within 250 feet of a traffic camera.

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The traffic deaths, the data shows, fall disproportionately on lower-income and majority-Black neighborhoods in Wards 7 and 8, which accounted for half of the fatalities so far this year.

Transportation officials say the program is moving in the right direction, despite fatalities doubling and major injuries remaining high.

The majority of crash victims were pedestrians, followed by drivers

Since 2015, pedestrians have accounted for about 40% of overall traffic fatalities in D.C.

*Data for 2024 is through August 22.
"Other" includes scooters, ATVs and personal mobility devices.

Source: Vision Zero Crash Analysis Dashboard SUSIE WEBB / THE WASHINGTON POST

"The cameras work," said Sharon Kershbaum, acting director of the D.C. Transportation Department. She blamed a "small number who flout the law" for rising deaths. The Vision Zero office added that it takes time for cameras to affect driver behavior.

But experts say D.C., like other U.S. cities, has not been aggressive enough in enforcing traffic rules, expanding car-free zones and redesigning problem roads to meaningfully reduce fatal and dangerous crashes. D.C. can't use camera-issued tickets to suspend the licenses or car registrations of nonresident drivers. Maryland and Virginia, whose residents dominate city roads and receive the most citations, only enforce in-person tickets.

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The Vision Zero movement started in Sweden in 1997 and took hold in the United States over the past decade. While Sweden still hasn't achieved zero deaths, the initiative has halved the number of road deaths. In the United States, however, traffic fatalities have been rising.

"We're doing these Band-Aids that don't really fix the fundamental flaws that got us here," said Wesley Marshall, a professor of civil engineering at the University of Colorado at Denver who has studied Vision Zero programs around the country. "D.C. is doing a little bit better [than other cities] in terms of camera enforcement, but for the most part, it's still business as usual."

Broken 'covenant with the public'

When Mohamed Samura said he wanted to go to Howard University, his mother worried about gun violence. Regina Swarray, who raised her only son in Northern Virginia, told him not to go out at night and to avoid groups of strange men.

Swarray was comforted to know Mohamed wasn't a smoker or a drinker; he spent his weekends working at a senior home. But on the afternoon of April 11, as he walked across campus, a driver trying to turn left jumped onto the sidewalk and hit Samura. He died at the university's hospital four days later, becoming the 16th person killed in a car crash in D.C. this year.

"I was afraid of D.C., with the gunshots and everything," Swarray said. "I was never thinking of accidents. ... I never knew how bad it is."

Howard freshman Mohamed Samura was struck by a car while walking across campus in April, becoming the 16th person killed in a car crash in D.C. this year. (Family photo)

The youngest of the 33 victims so far in 2024 was 5 years old. The oldest was 89. Most were men, and close to half were pedestrians. Five people on motorcycles or mopeds and two bicyclists were among those killed. At least 10 of the deaths involved high speeds.

In 2022, Bowser conceded that the goal of reaching zero deaths by 2024 "was ambitious and has not been without its challenges," and issued an update promising to focus on the 15 most dangerous corridors — major roads across the city that are responsible for the majority of deaths and injuries.

There have been no significant changes since 2022 in the percentage of major injuries that occur along the most dangerous roads, according to a Post analysis of city traffic data. About 40 percent of major-injury crashes so far this year have occurred along those corridors, according to the Post analysis.

D.C. traffic fatalities in 2024

Vision Zero has focused its efforts to reduce traffic deaths along the most dangerous routes, or high-injury networks, in the District, relying heavily on traffic cameras for enforcement.

Data through August 22.

Source: Vision Zero Crash Analysis Dashboard SUSIE WEBB AND TIM MEKO / THE WASHINGTON POST

Critics say that's because city leaders have refused to meaningfully limit traffic on the major arterial roads, where people drive like they are on highways but are on urban streets dense with pedestrians and cyclists. A Florida Avenue NE project, in planning since 2013, was completed in 2019 only after two deaths and an intervention by the city council. The city says that experience led to faster response times, and that hundreds of safety improvements are now installed every year. But the city government nixed traffic-slowing bike lanes on two other high-injury roads, K Street NW and Connecticut Avenue NW, after pushback from drivers.

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"The city has done thousands of projects on neighborhood streets — speed humps, things like that. Those are all good things to do. But it's probably not preventing the next fatality," said Cheryl Cort of the Coalition for Smarter Growth, a pro-transit nonprofit. "It's really about arterial road design, and we're not getting the action that we need on those dangerous roadways."

When Bowser visited Deanwood last month to unveil a revamped pedestrian bridge across Interstate 295, a group of local residents expressed frustration. A better bridge didn't change the fact that their community was bisected by a highway, they told a mayoral staffer, with few businesses in walking distance.

"We're like an island over here," said Cindy Hamilton, a D.C. native who's lived in Deanwood for 10 years. She said there are constant crashes along that I-295 corridor; cars slow down for the cameras and then speed up again.

Cindy Hamilton, a 10-year resident of Deanwood, stands in front of the newly revamped Douglas Street Pedestrian Bridge over I-295 on Aug. 7. (Craig Hudson for The Washington Post)

At the same time, residents questioned the mayor over D.C.'s steep parking and traffic ticket fees, which can rise to hundreds of dollars.

"I get safety, but it's so punitive to me," Hamilton said. "And they're saying, 'Oh, we're going to put cameras here. They're going to put more speed bumps here.' ... It's no different. So what else? What else is D.C. going to do other than punish the people?"

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The cameras bring in about $100 million a year, most of which is spent in the city's annual budget. In 2022, the D.C. Council voted that any excess, unbudgeted revenue from new cameras should go to Vision Zero efforts. But Bowser used it to plug other financial holes, and the law is now dead.

"I think it broke a covenant with the public, with the residents, that cameras are about safety," council member Charles Allen (D-Ward 6) said. "It told the public that it really is all about revenue."

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Two years ago, Allen says, he was walking his two children to school in Northeast when a driver swerved around a car waiting at a stop sign and nearly ran them over. As a member of the D.C. Council, he knew exactly who to call. Within 24 hours, plastic barriers had been added to the street to prevent that kind of maneuver.

But he says those interventions usually don't happen nearly that fast, and also aren't enough.

Allen shepherded legislation passed this year making it easier to go after reckless drivers racking up tickets both inside and outside the city. But he says in-person enforcement has to play a role, too.

Instead, as traffic deaths have risen, police enforcement has declined sharply. In 2019, D.C. police logged 115,384 traffic violations, warnings and arrest charges. In 2023, it was 55,306.

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"Residents see someone drive through a red light, drive through a stop sign, and nothing happens," Allen said. "People need to know that there's consistent, reliable enforcement that's going to be taking place."

The police department has blamed understaffing combined with "mixed messages" about traffic enforcement after the racial justice protests of 2020. In a statement, a D.C. police spokesperson said that for the past year, police have been operating more traffic checkpoints.

Has anything changed?

A speed camera is visible as traffic moves along Minnesota Avenue NE earlier this month. The city is planning a bus-only lane for the stretch. (Craig Hudson for The Washington Post)

A report by the Office of the DC Auditor last year found that D.C.'s program was underfunded and underdeveloped for years. Vision Zero's office pushed back, saying the audit didn't include tens of millions in streetscape changes outside of the Vision Zero division. And since then, Vision Zero Director Charlie Willson said, spending has grown.

"There are major investments and ongoing projects," Willson said, and the Vision Zero office is "operating at a higher capacity than ever before."

D.C.'s efforts to crack down on dangerous driving

D.C. says it has invested in Vision Zero efforts in several ways in the past few years. According to city officials:

- About 640 licenses have been suspended because drivers failed to get a breathalyzer ignition lock.
- More than 1,435 vehicles with $4.1 million in outstanding fines were booted or towed.
- Roughly $418 million has been spent on roadway changes.

Vision Zero last year launched a project to send targeted messages to dangerous drivers; the city is also looking at new technology to ticket people holding their phones while driving. Starting this year, the Department of Public Works has focused on getting cars that have accumulated numerous tickets off the streets.

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"We're really working hard across all of our agencies to make our roads safer," Bowser said at the bridge unveiling, in response to questions about Vision Zero's anniversary.

Willson pointed to several infrastructure efforts that have made a difference. In January, the city plans to unveil a new Vision Zero Action Plan.

The city has reduced the speed limit on most city streets to 20 mph, and 25 mph on major roads. "A lot of drivers follow the speed limit," Willson said. "And that basically forces everybody else to slow down just a little."

On Minnesota Avenue SE, the city has put in a dedicated bus lane that decreases the space for cars. Before it was marked off, according to city data, 98 percent of cars zoomed past Kimball Elementary School. After the bus lane, average speeds were cut in half, from 15 miles over the limit to five under.

Ultimately, 25 miles of bus-only lanes are planned — including an extension to Minnesota Avenue NE — though only 13 are complete. Protected bike lanes, which also reduce car speeds, have been expanded from five to nearly 40 miles in the past nine years.

Traffic moves past the intersection of Minnesota Avenue and Eastern Avenue NE. (Craig Hudson for The Washington Post)

Still, fatal crashes haven't slowed, and the number of major injuries from car crashes has declined only 8 percent since 2017, The Post found.

Vision Zero officials pointed to a decline in major injuries as evidence that the program's strategies were working. But the office later acknowledged that most of the drop was actually due to a change in classification in 2021 — lost teeth and potential internal injuries are no longer considered major.

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The pedestrian bridge Bowser recently celebrated sits a few blocks away from an intersection that's among the worst in the city. Drivers coming down Minnesota Avenue turn left to get onto the highway. Angela O'Neal said she's lived there three years and seen several crashes as drivers try to beat a short green-turn light.

"Since they put the cameras down there, it has gotten a lot better," she said. But she said cars still speed farther up the street, and she sees young men drag racing through the neighborhood, with no police intervention.

"They're slow down there," she said. "But they speed up and down this street all the time."



Traffic on I-295 in Washington. (Craig Hudson for The Washington Post)

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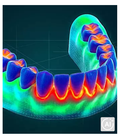

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