

# Watch where you're going! Pedestrian deaths peak



**Bill Moak**  
CONSUMER WATCH

Recently, as my son and I were walking across the grocery store parking lot to get some groceries, we were nearly hit by a car whose driver seemed oblivious to our presence as she

turned the corner. Luckily, we were paying attention and had time to get out of the way. As we continued into the store, a store employee who was collecting shopping carts and saw the incident shook his head sympathetically and said, "it happens all the time." It's actually the second time in a year we've been nearly mowed down in the grocery store parking lot.

It's a dangerous time to be a pedestrian in the United States. The Governors Highway Safety Administration just re-

leased its annual study of pedestrian deaths, which examines the problem of people getting killed after being struck by vehicles. The grim statistic: nearly 6,000 pedestrians died in 2016, the highest in 20 years.

That's a 25 percent increase from 2010, making pedestrians the largest portion of all traffic deaths recorded in the past 25 years. And the 2016 spike marks an 11 percent increase from 2015 (the previous record-holder). The GHSA, a nonprofit made up of state highway safety

offices, notes that the numbers could be higher, owing to the under-reporting of incidents. All told, 34 states had increases, and Mississippi ranked 20th in the nation for deaths as a percentage of total population for the first six months of 2016 (that's actually an improvement from the previous year, but the second-half 2016 statistics haven't come in yet.)

So, what's causing all this mayhem? The authors of the study note the rapid increase in the use of smartphones could help explain at least part of the phenomenon because these devices present a "significant source of distraction for both pedestrians and motorists."

We've all seen them, and maybe you've been

one of them: people whose attention is focused on their smartphone while walking carelessly. Videos abound of people falling headlong into fountains, disappearing into open manholes or tripping on the curb while checking their email, posting to Facebook or looking for that elusive "Pokemon Go" character. Others fail to pay attention to oncoming traffic while crossing the street, leading to their being struck and often killed.

Drivers, too, are distracted. It's been well-established that phone use while driving can present a serious attention deficit for drivers, becoming more serious the faster they drive. Unsurprisingly, alcohol also plays a role here, as it does in auto crashes in general. Thirty-four percent of pedestrians and 15 percent of drivers involved in fatal crashes were intoxicated at the time of the crash, noted the study.

And although vehicles are getting better about avoiding crashing into things through collision-avoidance technologies, and local cities and states are taking measures to make things safer, the numbers continue to rise. It could be, the study's authors note, more people are walking for fitness and economic reasons at the same time the numbers of vehicles on the road has risen be-

cause of the improving economy.

"This latest data shows that the U.S. isn't meeting the mark on keeping pedestrians safe on our roadways," Jonathan Adkins, GHSA executive director, told PBS Newshour. "Every one of these lives represents a loved one not coming home tonight, which is absolutely unacceptable."

The Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center (pedbikeinfo.org) has some helpful tips to make your walk or run safer. Here are a few:

» Wear brightly colored clothing and reflective tape at night. These can help increase your visibility to motorists.

» Always walk on the sidewalk if one is available; if not, walk facing traffic so you can see approaching vehicles.

» Don't assume drivers will stop. Try to make eye contact with the driver and be prepared to move if he or she doesn't appear to notice you.

» Cross streets only at crosswalks, if possible.

» Don't wear earbuds or use your phone while walking.

And finally, if you're a driver in the grocery store parking lot, please ... slow down, put down your phone and pay attention. You might save a life.

Contact Bill Moak at [moakconsumer@email.com](mailto:moakconsumer@email.com).



## senior DAY

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