PROJECT SYNOPSIS

FOUNDATION FOR TRAFFIC SAFETY

UNDERSTANDING THE INCREASING TREND IN TRAFFIC FATALITIES IN URBAN AREAS

INTRODUCTION

There has been an important shift over the past 20 years in the geographic distribution of traffic fatalities from rural areas to urban areas. While rural roads remain more dangerous than urban roads in terms of traffic fatalities per vehicle-mile of travel, fatality rates on rural roads have been falling steadily. In contrast, fatality rates on urban roads have been rising. In 2002, 60% of all deaths in motor vehicle crashes in the United States occurred on roads classified by the Federal Highway Administration as rural. By 2022, 59% occurred on urban roads. Importantly, this has not been a zero-sum shift in locations of crashes. Total annual traffic fatalities nationwide have increased by more than 30% since reaching their modern era record low in 2011, and data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reveals that the entire increase has taken place in urban areas. Researchers at the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety are working to uncover the factors responsible for the increasing rate of traffic fatalities in urban areas.

PROJECT GOAL AND PLAN

This project seeks to understand why rates of traffic fatalities have been increasing in urban areas, to inform traffic safety stakeholders' efforts to combat this trend. First, AAA Foundation researchers will identify and summarize the findings of any relevant literature pointing to potential factors contributing to the increasing trend in traffic fatalities in urban areas, and summarize the overall trends observed in traffic fatalities in urban areas. Second, the research team will examine the relationships of trends in urban traffic fatalities with community-level factors such as changes in population, demographic characteristics, economic factors, the built environment, and other factors. Researchers will also investigate trends in nonfatal injury crashes in urban areas in several states. Finally, case studies will be conducted in multiple cities or counties to examine contributing factors in greater depth.

Project Team

AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety
Brian Tefft
(Principal Investigator)

Period of Performance

September 2024 – March 2026