

Portland Reports Lowest Traffic Fatalities Ever in 2008

By Greg Raisman, Portland Bureau of Transportation

Fewer people died on Portland's (Ore.) roads in 2008 than at any other time in the city's history. In 2008, there were a total of 20 traffic fatalities in the city: 15 motor vehicle occupants, five pedestrians, and zero bicyclists. This is the lowest number of total traffic fatalities for any year on record, since 1925. The highest number of traffic fatalities was 89 in 1934; the second highest was 84 in 1972.

Some highlights from the data include:

- The lowest number of fatalities for motor vehicle occupants on record
- The lowest number of pedestrian fatalities on record (the highest was 52 pedestrian fatalities in 1934 and 1936)
- The fifth year in the past decade with zero bicycle fatalities in the City of Portland

This good news is part of a long-term trend. Total traffic fatalities in the City of Portland have been going down since the mid-1980s, thanks to a variety of factors related to crash prevention and crash survivability. Many people assume that the positive trends can be attributed to innovations in safety technology and emergency response. These factors certainly contribute to fewer injuries and fatalities. It's critical that people continue to use seatbelts and that car manufacturers keep putting in airbags. But something else happening, too.

For example, more than 95% of Oregonians use their seatbelts and many cars on the road now have airbags. However, over the past decade, fatalities per 100,000 residents in Portland have gone down three times faster than the rest of Oregon. If seatbelts were the explanation, Portland and Oregon as a whole would have the same results. What else could it be?

Portland has focused on addressing speeding drivers because the city knows that speed kills. Portland Traffic Safety newsletters from 1940-42 addressed the need to slow down. The state passed the Basic Rule in 1941 and police started to enforce speed laws. As the city began focusing on speed in the mid-1930s, traffic fatalities went down. When muscle cars and higher speed limits were introduced in the mid-1960s, traffic fatalities went up.

The city has addressed speeding with a comprehensive traffic safety program that includes traffic calming (speed bumps, signal coordination, curb extensions, traffic diversion); photo speed enforcement and police patrols; pedestrian and bicycle safety initiatives; traffic safety education; and neighborhood involvement and community dialogue. Portland has also worked to increase the amount of walking, bicycling, and transit use in the city. Outside the U.S., the cities with the best traffic safety performance and overall trends focus on comprehensive programs that make the streets safer for the most vulnerable.

As the streets become safer for the most vulnerable, they become safer for everybody. So, as it becomes safer for a child to walk to school, a senior to ride a bicycle to a park, or a person with disabilities to travel independently, it seems to become safer to drive. Motor vehicles are essential for many reasons; however, converting trips from single occupancy cars to walking, bicycling, and transit makes a city safer and more livable. Read a detailed research study that explores this phenomenon here: <http://www.vtpi.org/safetrav.pdf>

Research suggests that as more people ride bicycles, it becomes safer to ride a bicycle, or in fact to travel by any mode. The Netherlands had a 50% increase in miles driven and a 50% increase in miles bicycled between 1980 and 2005. However, in 2005, 2.5 times fewer people died in traffic crashes while either driving or riding a bicycle. One study found that Davis, Calif.— which has the largest mode share for bicycles in the U.S.—has a fatality rate 15 times lower than nationally and 3 to 10 times lower than comparably-sized California cities.