

# TRAFFIC DEATHS SURGE IN MILWAUKEE COUNTY WHILE FALLING ELSEWHERE

*Motor vehicle fatalities for Milwaukee County residents, as well as Black and Hispanic Wisconsinites, have been on the rise, with more recent increases due in part to crashes linked to excessive speed. Among Black residents, Milwaukee County’s vehicle fatality rate is high compared to similar urban counties in other states. The shift in Milwaukee County sharply contrasts with the trend statewide, where such deaths have declined for decades.*

After motor vehicle fatalities soared in 2020 and 2021 in Wisconsin and nationally, they declined in 2022, but not by enough to return to pre-pandemic levels.

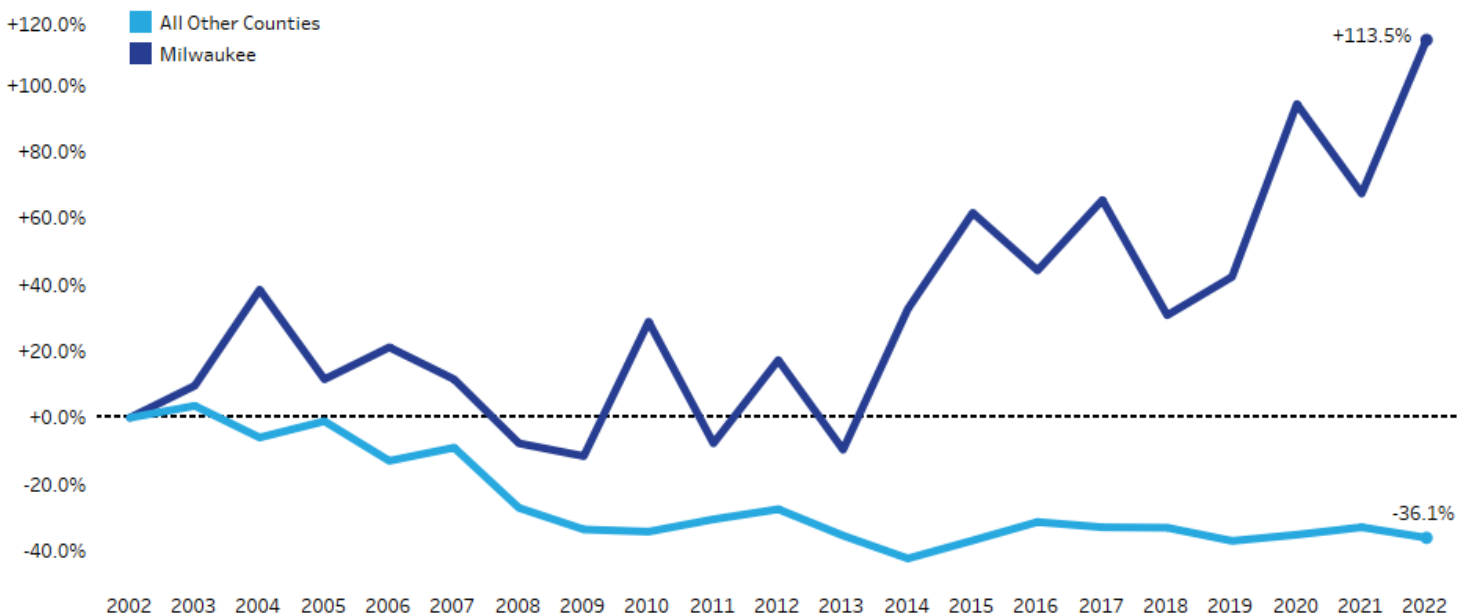
Following the acute phase of the pandemic, as of 2022, Wisconsin had reduced its motor vehicle fatality rate more than the nation. But statewide crash fatality data depict starkly different realities for Wisconsinites along lines of race, ethnicity, and geography.

Fatality rates for all Wisconsinites and for white Wisconsinites have declined over the long term. However, the opposite is true for Black residents.

Hispanic Wisconsinites also have seen a concerning, more recent surge in crash fatalities.

Urban areas, particularly Milwaukee County, play an outsized role in this trend, according to data from Community Maps, a real-time crash tracking application developed by the Wisconsin Department of Transportation in partnership with the Wisconsin Traffic Operations and Safety (TOPS) Laboratory at UW-Madison. A three-year average of crash fatalities shows they increased 69.9% in Milwaukee County from 2010-2012 through the most recent three years of data, 2020-2022. Meanwhile, the three-year average of fatalities declined 5.7% in all 71 other Wisconsin counties combined during this period.

**Figure 1: Auto Fatalities Double in Milwaukee, But Decline for Balance of State**  
Percentage change since 2002 in auto fatalities by year, Milwaukee versus all other Wisconsin counties



Source: Wisconsin Traffic Operations and Safety Laboratory Community Maps



The COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant changes in crash fatality trends, including an overall increase in fatalities in Wisconsin and nationally. While the divergence cited in the preceding paragraph began about a decade ago, the pandemic did not significantly alter its trajectory. From 2017-2019 through 2020-2022, the three-year average of fatalities increased 31.1% in Milwaukee County, while declining 0.6% in the balance of the state.

Over the past two decades, this divergence is even more striking, as shown in Figure 1 on the previous page. In Milwaukee County, we find traffic deaths increased 113.5% from 2002 to 2022. Conversely, fatalities declined 36.1% in the balance of the state during this period.

Two decades ago, Milwaukee County's motor vehicle fatality rate per 100,000 residents was just over half that of the rest of the state, according to data from another source, the Centers for Disease Control's WONDER database. Conversely, in 2022 – the most recent year for which we have reliable data – as well as for two of the three prior years, Milwaukee County's fatality rate was higher than the rest of the state. (In order to calculate fatality rates, the geographic location of deaths in the CDC's data is based on the decedent's place of residence. This contrasts with the DOT's Community Maps data, which uses the crash location instead.)

We also compared fatalities in Milwaukee County to eight similar urban counties in other states. Among them, Milwaukee County ranked only slightly above the middle of the pack in its overall crash fatality rate in 2022, but it ranked among the highest in crash fatality rates for Black residents.

## A STRIKING DIVERGENCE

Analyzing these traffic deaths by race highlights another sharp divergence in recent trends. Motor vehicle fatality rates for white Wisconsinites declined slightly from 2018 to 2022. Comparisons of these rates by race, for years before 2018 to those after 2020, are complicated by changes in racial classification criteria used in the CDC's [WONDER database](#). But the data make clear that over the last two decades, motor vehicle fatality rates for white Wisconsinites have declined significantly.

Meanwhile, from 2018 to 2022, fatality rates increased 9.8% for Black, non-Hispanic Wisconsinites. This

increase was much larger during the last two decades, and the increase for Black Wisconsinites during this period also was much greater than for all Black Americans.

For Hispanic Wisconsinites of all races, while fatality rates in 2022 were roughly the same as two decades ago, the increase since 2018 has been stark, at 45.3%. The fatality rate for all Hispanic Americans also increased during the latter period, by 26.4%.

Since Milwaukee County is home to a majority of Wisconsin's Black residents and a plurality of its Hispanic residents, it is not surprising that these trends have unfolded concurrently with an increase in crash fatalities there.

In one positive trend, the nation has seen a marked decrease over the last two decades in crash fatality rates among teens and young adults, as well as in the oldest age groups. Among teens and young adults, this trend has been even more pronounced in Wisconsin.

The CDC Wonder database allows us to look at crash fatality rates by 10-year age cohort. Among the cohort that includes the youngest drivers – ages 15-24 – there has been a sharp fatality rate decrease both nationally and in Wisconsin. Nationally, the decline occurred largely during the 2000s before effectively flat-lining during the last decade. Wisconsin, however, has seen marked declines in both of the last two decades, for a total fatality rate decrease of nearly two-thirds (-65.8%) since 2002.

## TREND IS PREDOMINANTLY URBAN

National context is key for any complete assessment of Milwaukee County's crash fatality rates. While higher than the statewide motor vehicle fatality rate of 10.6 per 100,000 residents in 2022, Milwaukee County's rate (13.0) was slightly below the national average (13.3). Yet these numbers also show how much has changed. In 2002, Milwaukee County's fatality rate was 9.2 per 100,000 residents, far below the 15.7 fatality rate that year both in Wisconsin and nationally.

In more recent years, the highest motor vehicle fatality rates have been recorded in states in the South and Mountain West. Wisconsin's crash fatality rate consistently has ranked in the bottom half of the 50 states.



Areas of Wisconsin with increasing crash fatalities extend beyond Milwaukee County, as data show a growing share of fatalities occurring in urban areas. Such fatalities have risen in Wisconsin's 20 largest cities collectively, Community Maps data show.

From 2012 to 2022, the total number of crash fatalities in the city of Milwaukee increased 107.1%. In the state's next 19 largest cities combined, there was an increase of 45.8% during this period. While significantly less than Milwaukee's increase, this easily outpaced population growth in these places, and contrasted with a 2.5% decline statewide during this period.

### SPEEDING IS KEY FACTOR

The Community Maps data also provide valuable insight into various contributing factors to motor vehicle crashes, which further illustrate the unique nature of crash fatality trends in Milwaukee County. One of the most striking examples is among crash fatalities for which law enforcement agencies determined excessive speed to be a factor.

From 2002 to 2022, the number of speeding-involved crash fatalities in Milwaukee County increased from 15 to 47, or 213% (see Figure 2). In this same timeframe, speeding-involved crash fatalities declined 55.1% in the balance of the state.

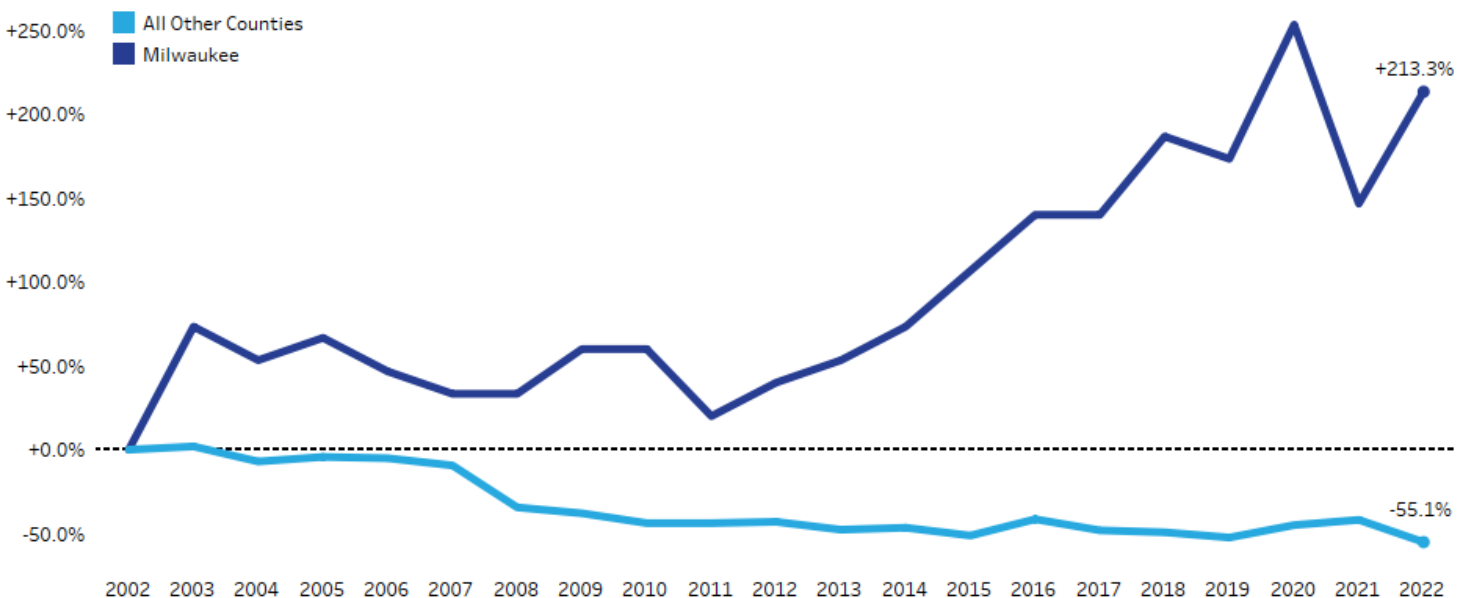
Another point of concern in Milwaukee County is pedestrian-involved crash fatalities, which hit a two-decade high of 32 in 2022, according to Community Maps. The small sample size of such fatalities means that caution is warranted in analyzing any changes. But a rolling five-year average of pedestrian-involved crash fatalities also shows that in 2022, it reached its highest point in Milwaukee County since at least 2005. Meanwhile, the rolling five-year average of pedestrian-involved crash fatalities in the balance of the state declined slightly during this period.

Several other major potential contributors to crash fatalities are not shown by these data to be significantly affecting Milwaukee County's increase. The number of crash fatalities involving impaired drivers has declined over the last two decades, both in Milwaukee County and statewide. Fatalities involving teen drivers declined statewide during this period, and did not increase in Milwaukee County.

Our analysis also looked at the time at which crash fatalities occurred in Milwaukee County. The share of fatalities that occurred at night (defined here as between 7 p.m. and 3 a.m.) has increased during the last decade – but was broadly in line with longer-term historical trends.

The Community Maps data are drawn from crash reports filed by law enforcement agencies that

**Figure 2: Speeding-Related Deaths Triple in Milwaukee, Fall by More Than Half in Rest of State**  
 Percentage change since 2002 in speeding-related auto fatalities by year, Milwaukee versus all other Wisconsin counties



Source: Wisconsin Traffic Operations and Safety Laboratory Community Maps



investigate vehicle crashes. Notably, new reporting forms were introduced in 2017, and it is possible this change affected how driver behaviors were documented.

### COMPARING TO MILWAUKEE'S PEERS

One hurdle to effectively analyzing Milwaukee County traffic safety trends is the fact that many of our data sources are limited to Wisconsin, which has no other counties comparable to Milwaukee in size, urban density, or demographics.

For this reason, as part of this analysis, we selected a comparison group of eight counties in Midwestern and Great Lakes states. The peer counties, including their largest cities, are: Allegheny County, Pa. (Pittsburgh); Cuyahoga County, Ohio (Cleveland); Erie County, N.Y. (Buffalo); Hamilton County, Ohio (Cincinnati); Hennepin County, Minn. (Minneapolis); Jackson County, Mo. (Kansas City); Marion County, Ind. (Indianapolis); and Wayne County, Mich. (Detroit).

In a comparison of these counties' overall motor vehicle fatality rates, Milwaukee County ranks slightly above average (see Figure 3). Since some counties do not have large annual totals of crash fatalities, here we compare rates for the last three years combined (2020-2022). Milwaukee County's fatality rate during this period was 12.7 per 100,000 compared to an average

of 11.2 among all of these counties combined – ranking it fourth among the nine counties.

Fatality rates among Black residents exhibit a clearer divide. Milwaukee, Marion, Wayne, and Jackson counties had very similar fatality rates over the three-year period for Black, non-Hispanic residents that were much higher than the other five counties (Allegheny, Cuyahoga, Erie, Hamilton, Hennepin). In all nine counties, the fatality rates were notably higher for Black residents than all residents.

Among Hispanic residents, crash fatality totals in these counties were not sufficiently high for CDC Wonder to publish the fatality rates used for this comparison.

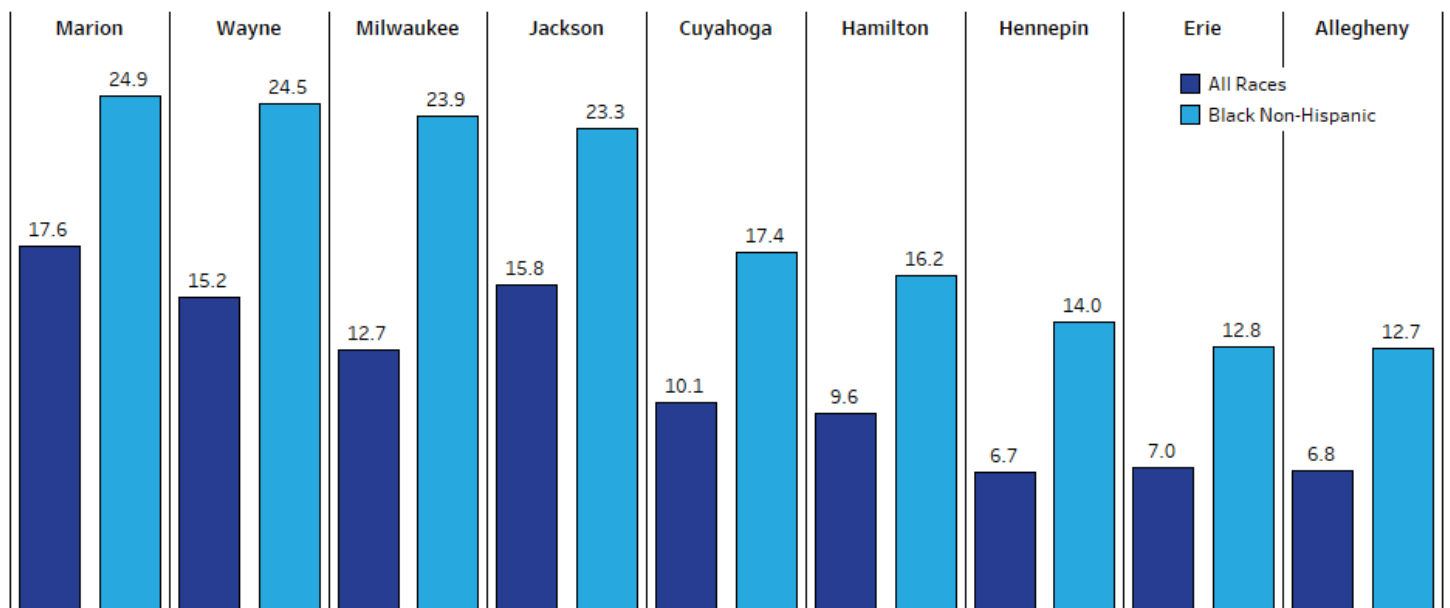
### CONCLUSION

While some of the trends documented in this report accelerated during the pandemic, many predated it. In February 2020, [our research found](#) there had been “a sharp increase in deaths of black Wisconsinites in motor vehicle crashes” during the period from 2013 to 2018.

Since then, state and local policymakers increasingly have prioritized making streets safer, in part by reducing reckless driving. The city of Milwaukee has joined the multinational “Vision Zero” initiative, which holds that no traffic deaths are acceptable and aims to reduce

**Figure 3: Black Milwaukeeans Die at High Rates from Auto Fatalities**

Average annual deaths per 100,000 from 2020 to 2022, Milwaukee and eight peer counties, residents of all races versus black, non-Hispanic residents



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention WONDER



traffic fatalities to zero by a given date – in Milwaukee’s case, 2037.

The city has launched a [wide-ranging effort](#) to engineer its streets to encourage drivers to drive more slowly and safely, and to provide more dedicated space for cyclists and pedestrians. The city also is working to increase the number of Milwaukee police officers assigned to enforce driving violations.

It’s important to note that while much of the discussion about traffic safety revolves around actions taken by the city, the county and state also own many roads in Milwaukee and are responsible for their design, construction, and maintenance.

At the state level, lawmakers have passed, and Gov. Tony Evers has signed, a host of laws since 2023 aimed at curbing reckless driving. Those include laws that [increase criminal penalties for reckless driving](#), [carjacking](#), or for [fleeing or attempting to elude a police officer](#); and that [boost funding for driver’s education](#).

[Recent research by the city](#) and county has also examined, in far greater detail than this report, where and how crash fatalities are occurring, and how to prevent them. An in-depth [traffic safety assessment](#) released in February by the Milwaukee County Department of Transportation identified characteristics for areas and roads with disproportionately high levels of fatality and serious injury crashes. It found high levels of crashes in places with high levels of poverty, language isolation, or low vehicle access. It also found that arterial roads with more traffic and lanes had disproportionately greater risk of fatality or serious injury crashes.

These findings may inform ongoing efforts to identify the types of streets where engineering design changes and traffic enforcement initiatives might be targeted in order to save lives. Milwaukee-area officials also continue to seek authorization from state lawmakers to deploy new enforcement tools such as red-light cameras. Use of these cameras, if permitted, would require privacy and logistical considerations to be addressed. However, they also have the potential to enable law enforcement to enforce traffic violations at a far greater scale.

Equity concerns must be a consideration in any discussion about increased traffic enforcement. This applies both to who could be cited by heightened enforcement, and who might be protected by it. There

may be concern about red-light cameras being deployed disproportionately in neighborhoods predominantly populated by residents of color. At the same time, deploying the cameras in areas with higher crash rates may have greater potential to save lives.

Ultimately, recent trends in crash fatalities in Milwaukee County certainly continue to merit concern and action. Recent responses from state and local policymakers show they are taking the problem seriously, but additional steps may be required to reverse the long-term trends we have discussed and put the region back on a trajectory toward safer streets.

