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# Road Warrior: Bicycle fatalities in N.J. defy overall drop in traffic deaths

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AMY NEWMAN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER/FILE PHOTO  
Bicyclists climb a hill on Rt. 9W near Sage Road in Englewood Cliffs.

New Jersey road deaths fell a bit less than 1 percent to 554 last year — a near record low — but those who rely on bicycles or let others drive for them won't find much comfort in year-end fatality figures for 2015.

Cycling deaths ballooned 64 percent to 18 last year, the most since 2008, and passenger fatalities rose to 95, almost a 19 percent rise, according to preliminary New Jersey State Police figures. On

a more positive note, motorcycle deaths dropped to a record low 49 and pedestrian fatalities fell to 163, but that figure remained well in excess of the previous 10-year average of 152.

“We’re pleased, but we think we can do even better,” said Gary Poedubicky, acting director of the state Division of Highway Traffic Safety.

States like New Jersey and New York, where overall road fatalities have declined substantially since the 1980s, have been struggling to extend these safety benefits beyond drivers to walkers and cyclists, whose combined death counts have remained stubbornly high. Garden State totals showed 172 pedestrians and cyclists were killed in 2005 compared with 81 in 2014, a 5 percent increase. During the same period, all traffic deaths declined more than 25 percent — from 748 in 2005 to 556 in 2014.

This week, the Legislature sent a bill to Governor Christie that would focus on these mostly preventable incidents — the kind that killed 1,517 people on foot and 143 people on bicycles from 2005 to 2014. The legislation, which unanimously passed both houses, would create a 15-member commission to recommend strategies for making improvements in road design, laws and behavior that traditionally favor vehicles over people, said Cindy Steiner of Montclair, executive director of the New Jersey Bicycle and Walking Coalition.

“More people are walking and riding bicycles than ever,” said Steiner, whose group supports the bill — A-3888 in the Assembly and S-2521 in the Senate. “But for the first time, this commission would put all the parties together who have a stake in the problem — from bicyclists and drivers to police, motor-vehicle executives, transportation officials and even the health commissioner.”

Steiner and other transportation safety advocates think New Jersey should do even more. They look longingly across the Hudson to New York City, where pedestrian and bicycling deaths fell substantially last year under a policy that began in Sweden and has spread to states including California and Montana and big cities such as Philadelphia, San Francisco and the Big Apple.

It calls for setting firm goals to improve street design and enforcement among other methods for reducing fatalities to zero by a deadline. Called “Vision Zero,” the strategy requires a commitment by mayors or governors to get behind initiatives that can be expensive and politically unpopular, such as stiffening traffic fines, lowering speed limits and rebuilding troublesome intersections.

Since taking office in 2014, New York Mayor Bill de Blasio has claimed success for several Vision Zero initiatives. In 2015, pedestrian deaths fell by 5 percent to 133 and bicycle deaths dropped 30 percent to 14. Steps taken by the de Blasio administration included increasing speeding tickets by 59 percent, installing 140 speed cameras near schools, closing parts of two major parks on weekdays, and planning a redesign of Queens Boulevard, often called the “Boulevard of Death.”

“It’s the sort of policy that ought to be supported here, especially in urban areas like Newark, suburbs like Bergen County, and rural areas like Burlington County — all of which pose serious problems for walkers and cyclists,” said AAA New Jersey spokeswoman Cathleen Lewis.

With the National Safety Council now rating motor-vehicle crashes as America’s fifth most likely cause of death, it’s hard to find a road-safety advocate who disagrees.

“It’s certainly something we should look at,” said Poedubicky.

So far, though, neither the governor, nor lawmakers, nor any of New Jersey’s 565 mayors has proposed Vision Zero legislation. Instead, the state Department of Transportation and several towns and counties are supporting similar Complete Streets policies, which call for pedestrian safety improvements whenever a major road project is approved. Hardly anyone, it seems, wants to sign a pledge to kill off a killer as chronic as road crashes by a fixed deadline.

For his part, de Blasio gave himself 10 years, which would require two more terms as mayor.

For its part, however, New Jersey can boast at least one major safety gain: Motorcycle deaths plummeted to 49 after 10 previous years when they averaged 75 annually. Motorcycle instructor Dave Bellizzi attributed the decline to expanding enrollments in the state’s riding academies.

“Constant training is the only way to reduce these crashes,” said Bellizzi, site coordinator for the New Jersey Riding Academy in Paterson.

Sure enough, Motor Vehicle Commission records showed motorcycle training enrollment has been rising — from 7,403 in 2013 and 7,504 in 2014 to 8,514 in 2015.

A key change in road testing may have helped, too. It’s no longer legal to get a motorcycle-endorsed license by passing a test on a small bike, then use that license to drive a much larger, more unwieldy bike, said MVC spokeswoman Mairin Bellack.

But problems associated with New Jersey road fatalities extend well beyond people who rely either on foot power or those who drive vehicles powered by two, four or more wheels. The latest state police figures also show a big jump in passenger fatalities — from 80 in 2014 to 95 in 2015.

Has buckling up fallen out of favor for New Jersey passengers?

It will take at least another year before state police investigators can answer definitively, but a New Jersey Institute of Technology study contains some clues. According to NJIT observational surveys, adult passengers in front seats usually have fairly good buckling records. Its 2014 survey showed those sitting to the driver's right used belts at an 89 percent rate.

But NJIT's 2015 study showed front-seat adults buckled up a little less — 87 percent. And adults in back were even less scrupulous. Last year they wore belts at a 39 percent rate, compared to 44 percent in 2014. The worst back-seat backsliders were young riders over 18 who belted up just 64 percent of the time — a 12 percent decline compared to the previous year.

Modern vehicle safety technology may have given too many passengers a false sense of security, concluded AAA's Lewis.

“People think they're safe because air bags are now located throughout a car,” she said, “but in a crash it usually doesn't matter how many air bags there are if you're not belted.”

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