

Executive Summary & Policy Recommendations

Washington developed its first Target Zero Plan in 2000, establishing the goal of zero fatalities and serious injuries on Washington roads. At the time, 2030 was an aspirational timeline for this vision. And like any ambitious goal, there have been both advances and setbacks.

Washington experienced a reduction in traffic fatalities following the establishment of the 0.08 *per se* blood alcohol concentration limit, the primary seatbelt law, child restraint laws, laws prohibiting distracted driving, and enhancements in ignition interlock and other laws related to driving under the influence of impairing substances. However, since the COVID-19 pandemic response began in 2020, we have seen a rapid increase in fatalities and serious injuries.

Many have asked if we intend to change the goal or the target date. We do not. Moving the target farther into the future will not get us closer to our goal. Zero deaths remains the only acceptable roadway safety outcome. We know it is possible, because we understand that these crashes are preventable. There are 327 incorporated cities and unincorporated county areas in Washington. Of these, 148 achieved zero fatal crashes over the five-year period of 2019-2023.

Our goal is not to eliminate crashes of all severities completely. Some of the strategies outlined in this plan are aimed at preventing crashes from occurring, while others are designed to reduce their severity. In order to prevent death and disability, timely and effective post-crash responses are also critical.



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We need to implement more safety strategies in a more coordinated way. We also need to let go of ineffective practices. This is not always easy. Americans and Washingtonians have historically valued travel in private motor vehicles that is as fast and convenient as possible. An over-emphasis on speed and convenience has compromised our safety. It has led to unsafe driver behaviors and to road designs that prioritize throughput. Lax vehicle regulation has allowed increasingly large, fast, and powerful vehicles to dominate the landscape, putting other road users—including people who walk, bike, roll, and ride motorcycles—at greater risk.

An increase in motorists driving more miles increases the exposure to, and likelihood of, roadway crashes. Higher speeds increase severity because crash forces increase exponentially with speed. And while vehicles are being equipped with more safety features to protect occupants, walkers and rollers are still exposed and vulnerable when struck by a multi-ton projectile.

This plan is about finding a balance between allowing people and goods to travel where they need to go without the high cost of death and serious injury. In 2022 alone, the societal financial cost of crashes in Washington was greater than \$20 billion.

We can reach zero deaths and serious injuries if we maintain our commitment to Target Zero and employ evidence-based measures used to prevent death and serious injury around the world. This plan is based upon three foundational elements that will help us reach Target Zero: Prosocial Traffic Safety Culture, the Safe System Approach, and an Equity Framework.

Prosocial traffic safety culture means that everyone shares responsibility to allow and encourage safe travel. This includes policy makers, authorities who build and maintain transportation systems, and every day travelers, including truck drivers, private motorists, motorcyclists, walkers, and rollers.

Reaching Target Zero requires all of us to share this responsibility and use real-world experience to implement safety strategies. In the spirit of building a safe culture in Washington, we engaged hundreds of partners and community members in the development of the 2024 Target Zero Plan. These included cross-agency meetings; listening sessions with Tribal representatives, community-based organizations, and advocates; and input from people in the community through surveys and conversations. We also held listening sessions for regional and metropolitan transportation planning organizations, cities, and counties. We look forward to continuing to build on these relationships and expand community input as implementation of this plan moves forward. Everyone in Washington plays a role in keeping our roads safe.

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Safe System Approach

The best way we know to operationalize this safety culture is the framework called the Safe System Approach (SSA). Many of the concepts contained within the SSA are currently in use in Washington and around the world. What differentiates the Safe System Approach from previous approaches is the coordination and collective effort it requires across traditionally separate agencies, jurisdictions, disciplines, and groups of transportation professionals and road users.

All six Safe System Approach elements are required to function in concert to eliminate serious injuries and fatalities:

- **Safer Road Users:** All road users engage in proactive safe behaviors, including paying attention, being visible, and following traffic laws. Road users also avoid high risk behaviors that lead to crashes and the potential for serious or fatal injury.
- **Safer Land Use Planning:** Understanding where people will live, work, attend school, and shop, authorities plan for shorter vehicle travel distances and safe travel using all modes, including active transportation, transit, and private and shared vehicles.
- **Safer Speeds:** Recognizing that crash forces increase exponentially with speed, transportation officials reduce drivers' operating speeds through self-enforcing road designs that encourage speeds that are safe for the road context and for all anticipated road users. Motor vehicle drivers' speeds are also managed through safer vehicle design, driver education, and proactive enforcement.

- **Safer Roads:** Transportation facilities are designed and built to separate users in time and space, manage speeds, and reduce crash impact angles at locations where road users are most likely to come into conflict. Facilities are designed and built to support safe travel using all modes: walking, rolling, biking, riding, driving, and transit.
- **Safer Vehicles:** Vehicles are designed and built to keep all road users inside and outside of the vehicle safe. This includes reduced vehicle mass, speed control, shapes that reduce injury severity for road users outside of the vehicle, active collision avoidance, technology that supports sober and attentive driving, increased visibility, and effective occupant protection.
- **Effective Post-Crash Care and Response:** First responders can arrive quickly at a crash scene and address the most imminent threats to life and health, limiting injury severity when a crash occurs. Investigations and data collection inform all system partners to reduce the recurrences of crashes resulting from lapses in any of the Safe System elements.

A wide range of partners are involved in creating and maintaining a safe transportation system, including the Governor, legislators, Tribes, federal partners, state agencies, local and regional authorities and agencies, law enforcement, educators, advocates, and people who take care to travel safely (and influence others to do so, as well).

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Each element of the Safe System Approach improves safety and provides additional safeguards to prevent a tragedy if or when another element fails. At a very basic level, a safe system separates road users in space and time and reduces crash forces when conflicts do occur. The approach does not prevent all crashes, but it helps to avoid fatal or life-altering consequences. These elements combine to reduce exposure to crash risks, the likelihood of a crash, and injury severity.

The Safe System Approach recognizes that safety doesn't rely only on road design, only on driver behavior, only on vehicle designs and technology, or only on public safety services. There is no single solution to reduce fatalities and serious injuries. Prevention of crashes, reductions in force, protection in crashes, and responses to crash events are all important ways to prevent death and reduce injury severity.

Equity Framework

To reach zero deaths and serious injuries on Washington roads, we must also contend with significant inequities in the risks that some road users face compared to others. For decades, demographics, including race, ethnicity, language, legal status, income, and wealth, have determined which communities face greater risks and who benefits from greater protections.

The history of redlining and other racial segregation, colonialism, and persistent socioeconomic disparities in Washington and in the United States have led some people and some communities to face far more transportation and other environmental inequities. At the same time,

historically marginalized groups in historically underinvested communities have been denied the kinds of safe transportation facilities, access to public transit, and other protective factors that reduce crash exposure.



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American Indian and Alaska Native people are the most overrepresented racial or ethnic group in traffic fatalities in Washington. Black road users are the second most overrepresented group in traffic fatalities. This has remained the case over many years and across road user types: drivers, passengers, walkers, bicyclists, and rollers. Tribal and rural communities are also affected by a general lack of safety infrastructure, fewer first responders covering larger distances, and often, roadways with higher posted speed limits.

Target Zero Emphasis Areas

Risk factors most commonly associated with fatal crashes fall into four categories. These are not mutually exclusive. Most crashes involve more than one of these (within and/or across categories):

1. **High-Risk Road User Behavior:** Impairment, Speeding, Distraction, and Lack of Seat Belt Use
2. **Road User Age Groups:** Young Drivers (age 15-24) and Older Drivers (age 70+)
3. **Locations:** Intersections and Lane Departures (including roadway departures)
4. **Road Users by Mode of Travel:** Motorcycle Riders, Heavy Vehicles, and Active Transportation Users (walkers and rollers)

This plan provides data from the most recent three-year period for which fatality and serious injury data are complete. Readers and users of the plan are encouraged to find updated data in future years available from

the Washington Traffic Safety Commission's [Data Dashboards](#) and through the Washington Department of Transportation's [Crash Data Portal](#). The Commission typically releases preliminary data for the prior calendar year in May and final data for the prior year in December.

These data help us to identify significant risks, which then point to potential solutions. Sources for effective countermeasures to prevent serious injury and fatal crashes include Countermeasures that Work, published by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). This provides information on the costs and effectiveness of measures to keep road users safer using education, enforcement, and other methods to impact road user behavior. For safe road design the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) Proven Safety Countermeasures describes a range of roadway treatments that improve safety on highways, county roads, city streets, and at locations where road users intersect.

Using the goals, policies, and strategies in the Target Zero Plan, upcoming implementation efforts will include a basic structure for activity implementation, tracking, evaluation, and reporting. Many of the strategies outlined are planned or underway. Additional implementation plans will be developed by WTSC, WSDOT, and other state agencies, as well as Tribal, regional, county, and local officials during this time. WSDOT will update its Highway Safety Improvement Program (HSIP) report annually. WTSC will update its current Triennial Highway Safety Plan in 2024 and 2025 and develop a new 3HSP in 2026. These documents outline many of the implementation strategies and funding for the safety projects, strategies, and tactics outlined in this document.

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Policy Recommendations

Prosocial traffic safety culture requires policy solutions that address identified risk factors. The Target Zero Plan features these policy recommendations to further develop and strengthen Washington's Safe System Approach for all road users. Many of these also support equity goals by reducing disparities in investment with the goal of reducing and eliminating disparate impacts in traffic safety outcomes.

There is no single policy change that will get Washington to zero traffic deaths. Instead, these recommendations work together to build and reinforce a Safe System and prevent traffic deaths. The question is not about choosing one strategy¹ over the other. The question is how soon Washington can adopt and implement these proven and promising strategies. Washington has consistently embraced changes to improve traffic safety. Many of the following are strategies employed by cities, states, and countries that are successfully reducing traffic fatality numbers and rates. Washington cannot reasonably expect to reach Target Zero without adopting these, as well.

- **Impaired Driving:** Establish a *per se* limit of 0.05% BAC for driving under the influence of alcohol in Washington. This is the most common limit for driving around the world and the level at which scientists have determined that individuals are too impaired to drive safely (i.e., the point at which a driver's risk of crash involvement has doubled).

1 The terms "strategy" and "countermeasure" are used interchangeably in this plan.

2 Washington Department of Licensing

- **Safer Speeds:** Increase strategies to reduce driver speeds on all road types. This can include increased law enforcement, automated enforcement systems, road designs focused on speed management, and the use of speed-limiting technology in vehicles on Washington roads.
- **Driver Education Affordability:** Provide financial assistance to novice drivers in Washington to access a certified driver education course. Fewer than half of young drivers under the age of 25 have completed formal driver education in Washington. Those who do not complete a safety course have a 70% higher rate of involvement in an injury crash between the ages of 18 and 25.²
- **Driver Education Access:** Expand opportunities for formal driver education services around the state, particularly in underserved rural areas. Increase driver training for novice drivers who speak languages other than English.
- **Prioritizing Active Transportation Infrastructure:** Continue to fund Complete Streets projects at the state and local levels to provide safe, accessible, and protected sidewalks, bike lanes, trails, and crossings for active transportation users. Vulnerable road users need separate facilities to travel safely and to avoid conflicts with vehicles that are large and travel at speeds likely to cause serious or fatal injuries to unprotected people who walk, bike, and roll. In areas where they interact with motor vehicle traffic, reduce exposure through engineering, education, and enforcement strategies.

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- **Disproportionate Impact:** Remove financial barriers and provide grants with upfront funding to Tribes for traffic safety programs and projects. American Indians and Alaska Natives are the most overrepresented racial or ethnic group in the state for traffic fatalities. Barriers to obtaining state funds to implement effective strategies have exacerbated and prolonged these risks.
- **Impaired Driving:** Revisit legal limits for cannabis-impaired driving based upon new research and data. Also consider making DUI presumptive if there is any substance that physically or mentally impacts the individual.
- **Toxicology Lab Facilities:** Remedy the DUI case backlog at the State Toxicology Lab by addressing the root causes of the backlog, including turnover of toxicologists.
- **Young Drivers:** Expand the requirement to complete a driver education course in order to obtain a Washington driver's license for first-time licensees through age 24 (currently through age 17). Along with driver education, the experience that young drivers gain through intermediate licensing significantly reduces the risk of a crash in the age group that currently has the highest rates of crash involvement.
- **Safer Drivers:** Increase dedicated traffic patrol units in cities and counties that have significant numbers of serious injury and fatal crashes. Emphasize high-risk behaviors, including DUI and speed.
- **Roadway Design:** Prioritize funding for roadway design strategies that reduce crossing conflicts for all road users at intersections, reduce travel speed, and keep vehicles on the roadway.
- **Safer Vehicles:** Collect data and study the impact of increased vehicle sizes and weights on crash risk and injury severity, particularly in relation to collisions involving vulnerable road users struck by larger and taller passenger vehicles.

We cannot continue to do the same things and expect different results. Increased coordination of these efforts and adoption of the policy priorities listed above will be necessary to reverse the current trend of increased fatalities and serious injuries so that we can move much closer to Target Zero over the next few years. 2030 is coming soon. We need to approach Target Zero today with the sense of urgency it deserves. The life we save may be your child's, your parent's, your co-worker's, your neighbor's, or your own.

Acknowledgments



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