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Boston traffic fatalities cut nearly in half, but overall crash numbers rise



DAVID L RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Digital feedback speed limit signs, like this one on Old Colony Avenue, are meant to improve traffic safety by lowering speeds.

By Max Reyes GLOBE CORRESPONDENT APRIL 18, 2019

The number of fatal traffic crashes in Boston has dropped by nearly half over the past three years, after a concerted effort by the city to improve traffic safety by lowering speed limits, adding protected bike lanes, and taking other traffic-calming measures.

But a new report Wednesday on traffic-related injuries from a coalition of urban activists also suggests that traffic safety remains a vexing problem across Boston: The overall number of accidents in the city that resulted in injuries has not gone down, increasing slightly from 2016 to 2018.

“There needs to be an urgency in responding to the number of crashes in the city of Boston,” said City Councilor Andrea Campbell, who has pushed for more safety measures.

The LiveableStreets Alliance and groups representing cyclists and pedestrians [published their third annual review](#) of Boston’s Vision Zero program, a major effort by City Hall to reduce fatal and serious accidents by the year 2030.

Using public data, the groups found there were 10 road-related fatalities in 2018, down from 14 the year before and 21 in 2016. But Boston had 4,367 crashes that resulted in nonfatal injuries last year — an average of 12 a day — a dozen higher than in 2016.

The Walsh administration said the data from the report are “strong indicators that the work we are undertaking is effective,” and pledged to increase spending on additional safety measures, including the use of technology in traffic signals and promoting transportation alternatives to cars.

But while giving the city “tremendous credit,” Stacy Thompson, executive director of the LiveableStreets Alliance, said the overall increase in accidents demonstrates the city has to be more assertive in introducing measures such as extended curbs and traffic pylons at crosswalks and protected bike lanes. In

particular, she said, the city should focus on major arterial roads that carry heavy through traffic, such as Massachusetts and Blue Hill avenues, and that also see heavy use from pedestrians and cyclists.

“We really need to do more robust work on our corridors,” said Thompson.

For example, Thompson and others said analysis of city data shows that fatal accidents were eight to nine times more common on arterial roads.

“We know arterials are where people are disproportionately being hit, injured, and killed,” said Becca Wolfson, executive director the Boston Cyclists Union.

The area along Mass. Ave. between the turnpike and the Charles River, for example, had nine accidents in 2018, [according to the city’s Vision Zero website](#), including one that resulted in the death of a man in his 80s who was hit by a dump truck in February while walking near the intersection with Newbury Street.

Mike Arundale, who works near the intersection, said he often sees drivers speed up Newbury to make the traffic light, as if they’re already entering the turnpike at the on-ramp across Mass. Ave.

“Sometimes you’ll see cars try to make the green light that they’ll see from the other block, and they’ll go 60 miles an hour down Newbury Street,” Arundale said outside the shop where he works.

Among the fatalities in 2018 was that of a 3-year-old boy in South Boston last summer who was struck when a van hit another car and jumped the curb. His 4-year-old sister was also injured.

Long infamous for its drivers, Boston earned a somewhat notorious designation earlier this year from national transportation data firm Inrix, which ranked the city’s rush hour traffic as the worst in the country.

The data also showed that not a single cyclist was killed in 2018, compared to two the previous year, and one in 2016. But there already has been a cyclist death this year. Paula Sharaga was killed in February in a collision with a cement truck at the intersection of Brookline Avenue and Park Drive.

In 2015, the same year a cyclist was struck by a truck and killed at a notorious Back Bay intersection, Walsh enrolled Boston in the so-called Vision Zero movement, to improve roadway safety and radically reduce accidents involving injuries. Since then, the city has spent millions on Vision Zero and other transportation-related safety measures. In his city budget proposal for fiscal year 2020, Walsh would put \$2 million toward bike infrastructure and \$4 million toward sidewalk improvements and other programs meant to make the city more walkable.

Most notably, Boston lowered its speed limit to 25 miles per hour, from 30 miles per hour, in 2017 on city roads, and city officials are considering [lowering it even more, to 20 miles per hour](#). A pilot program, Neighborhood Slow Streets, is underway in several sections of the city to test the 20-mil-per-hour limit.

But Campbell said Boston needs to do more than curb speed limits, and called for adding more speed humps on roads, adding to police enforcement and targeting police on hot spots for accidents, building out more infrastructure for cyclists, and encouraging people to take public transportation.

Other communities are going even further. In Cambridge, officials this month required permanent protected cycling lanes be installed on many of the city's major through streets when they are scheduled for major road work.

“I think a lot of the conversation for a period of time was focusing on just lowering the speed limit,” Campbell said. “That means nothing unless you're also changing the infrastructure of the streets.”

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