

Boston Vision Zero Progress Report

Year Five – 2019 & 2020

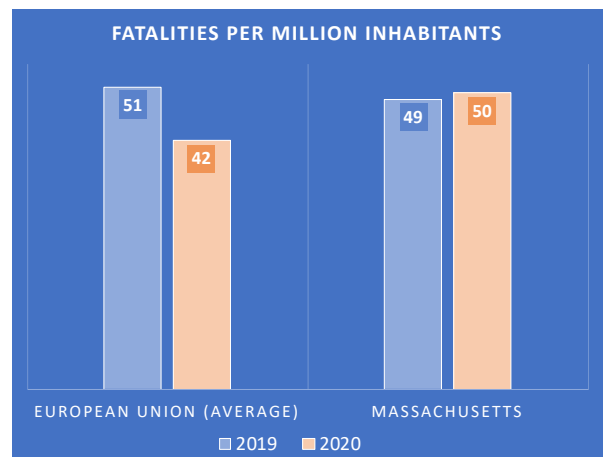
In 2015 the City of Boston committed to Vision Zero, a data-driven effort to eliminate serious and fatal crashes on city streets by 2030. Nearly six years later, the City of Boston has demonstrated consistent and measurable progress toward its goals. In many ways Boston is a national leader on Vision Zero, and Massachusetts as a whole is on par with the European Union, of which many countries have been working toward eliminating traffic fatalities for decades. While this is promising, it is also an inflection point for both the City and our Coalition.

As we evaluate the City's Vision Zero progress, it is crucial to recognize the devastation that the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought on our communities and the longstanding injustices it has exacerbated, as well as the devastation that systemic racism and police violence have wrought on Black people and other marginalized and oppressed communities.

It is critical for the Massachusetts Vision Zero Coalition, the City of Boston, and all who do Vision Zero work to take these truths into account in how we define and advocate for street safety. Our streets function as a network throughout our communities and are a vital public space to address not just traffic violence, but many other forms of injustice. It is within this context that we issue this report.

Since 2016, the Massachusetts Vision Zero Coalition has issued annual reports assessing the City's progress toward its Vision Zero goals. Last year, the Coalition did not release a progress report for 2019 and instead focused our efforts on developing recommendations for how the City of Boston could ensure safe mobility for essential workers and others during the shutdown phase of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ This year's report includes a summary and evaluation of the City's progress in both 2019 and 2020, along with specific recommendations for how Boston can continue moving toward its goal of eliminating traffic fatalities by 2030.

European Union vs. Massachusetts Trends



In 2019, the average number of traffic fatalities per million inhabitants across the European Union was 51, and dropped to 42 in 2020.² Massachusetts' traffic fatalities per million inhabitants were comparable to the EU average, falling just below it in 2019 at 49 fatalities per million inhabitants, and slightly above in 2020 with 50 fatalities per million inhabitants.³

Trends

The City of Boston has made meaningful progress toward achieving its Vision Zero targets since 2015. **Over the past five years, the total number of serious crashes and fatalities involving vulnerable road users has decreased significantly, despite fluctuations in mode each year.**

Fatalities of people walking and riding bikes have continued on a downward trend, from 15 in 2016 to 7 in 2020. The most significant change has been the reduction in the number of pedestrian fatalities since the City's adoption of Vision Zero, with only 5 in 2020 compared to 14 in 2016. The number of fatalities of people riding bikes in Boston has remained consistent over the past few years, with two or fewer fatalities since the Vision Zero program began. The number of serious crashes involving people walking or riding bikes has also continued its downward trajectory, from 1,315 in 2016 to 1,061 in 2019, a decrease of about 19%. In 2020, we saw the total number of crashes decrease further to a record low of 689.

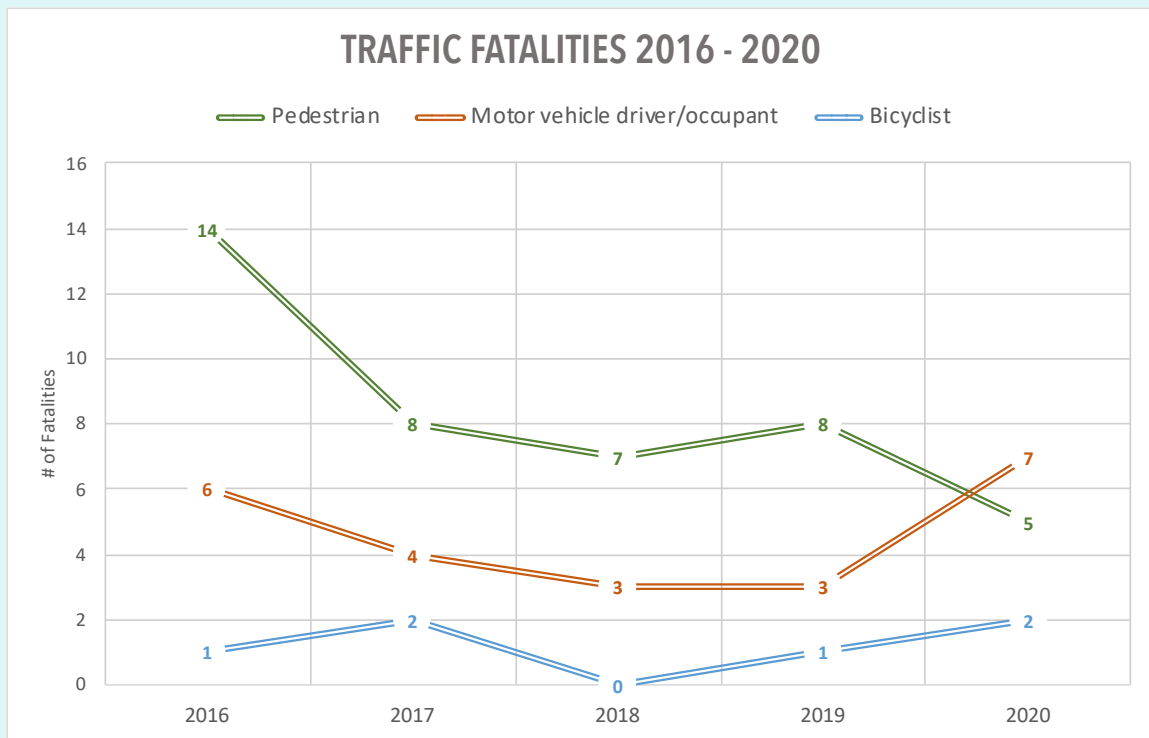
It is important to note that the COVID-19 pandemic reduced overall vehicle miles traveled, as well as pedestrian and bike traffic, within the City of Boston in 2020.⁴ For example, from April through December, pedestrian activity decreased considerably from 2019 numbers, dropping as much as 50% in May. This overall reduction in traffic of all modes has contributed to the significant decrease in the number of fatalities and serious crashes from 2019 to 2020. We must keep in mind these data do not reflect rates of crashes, and that lower absolute numbers are more reflective of the decrease in travel and street activity and not necessarily street safety improvements. However, this nuance should not detract from the positive downward trend in fatalities and serious crashes involving vulnerable road users over the past 5 years as a whole.

National Trends in Pedestrian Fatalities

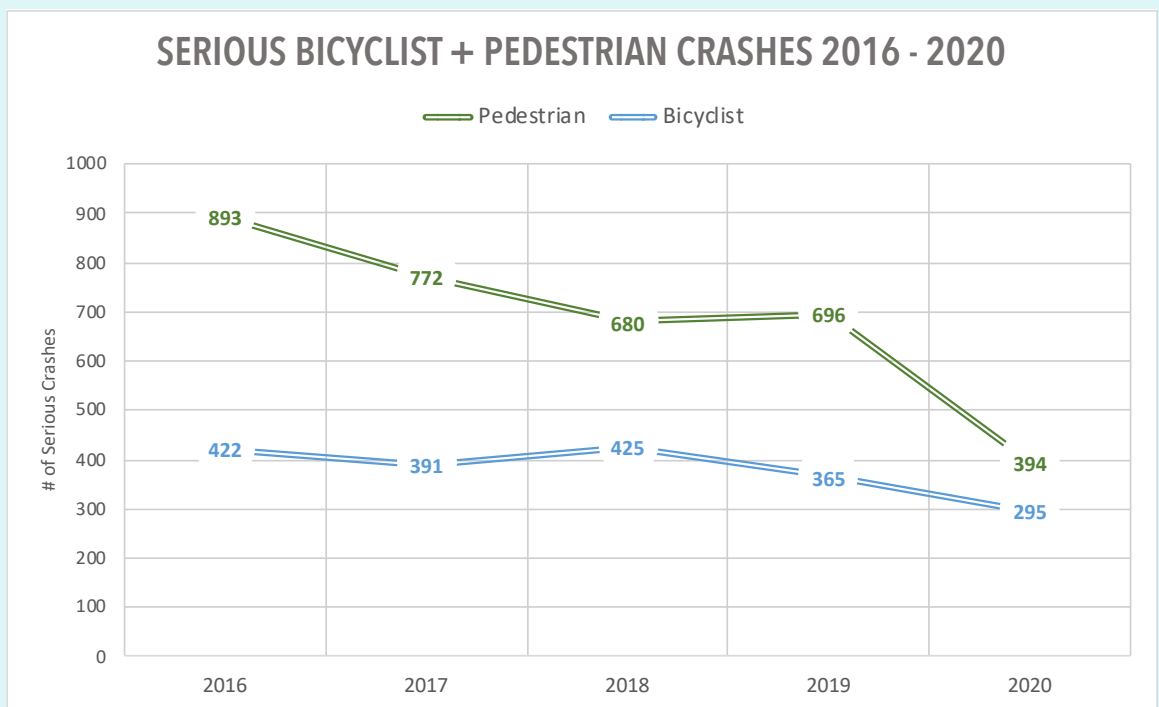
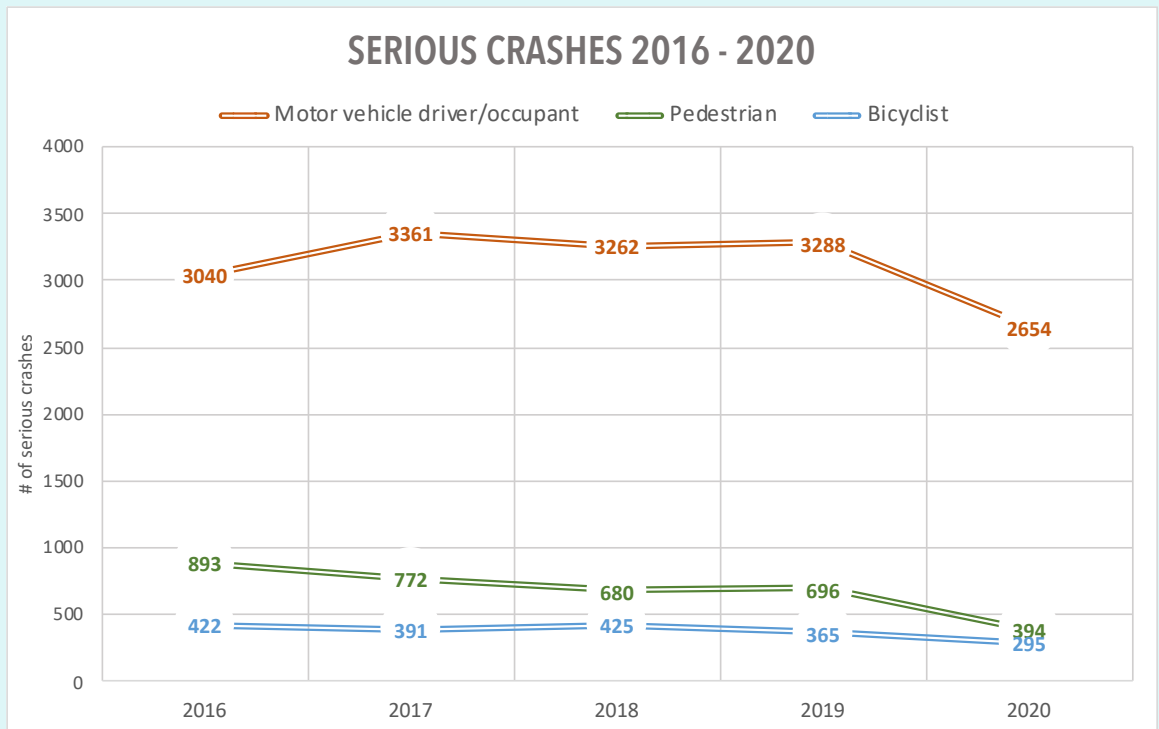
The Governors' Highway Safety Association measured a 20% increase in the rate of pedestrian fatalities in the first six months of 2020 compared to the same time period in 2019 (the national data for July through December has not yet been analyzed).⁶

While the significant reduction in crashes and fatalities involving people walking and biking is promising, other trends paint a more troubling picture. The number of serious injury crashes involving car drivers and occupants, and motorcyclists decreased from 3,288 in 2019 to 2,655 in 2020 - another record low. At the same time fatalities for these crashes increased from 3 in 2019 to 7 in 2020. The increase in fatalities, despite a decrease in serious injury crashes, is a concerning statistic. This shift is likely a result of an increase in speeding – a byproduct of fewer cars on the road due to the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵

Overall, trends suggest that the City is on track to meet its Vision Zero goals of eliminating traffic fatalities, along with its Go Boston 2030 target of decreasing the number of serious crashes involving people walking and biking by 30% by 2030. However, more work remains to ensure that these trends continue in the right direction. The increase in fatal crashes involving motorists and motorcyclists is a troubling pattern and should not be overlooked, even as streets have become safer for walking and biking.



Pedestrian, bicycle, and motor vehicle data sourced from [City of Boston Vision Zero Crash Map](#). Fatal motorcycle crashes are included within the motor vehicle data. The City of Boston data does not include State agency managed roads and parking lots; however, we have included one cyclist fatality on a State agency managed road in 2019 within the graph. There was one additional pedestrian fatality on a State road in 2019 according to the [MassDOT Crash Portal Dashboard](#), and one pedestrian fatality in a Boston MBTA bus yard in 2020 not included.



Pedestrian, bicycle, and motor vehicle data sourced from [City of Boston Vision Zero Crash Map](#). Serious injury motorcycle crashes are included in the motor vehicle crash total.

Recommendations

Given Boston's meaningful progress toward meeting its Vision Zero goals, we believe that it is time for a shift in strategy. The below recommendations reflect a pivot – shifting the focus of Vision Zero from simply preventing traffic fatalities to more proactively creating safe streets that encourage significantly more people to walk, bike, or use transit. Overall, we believe the final phase of achieving zero roadway fatalities in Boston will require a combination of crash reduction and mode shift.

To advance this new approach, the Massachusetts Vision Zero Coalition has outlined five recommendations below:

- 1. Update the Vision Zero Action Plan:** The City should release an updated version of their Vision Zero Action Plan, which was originally released in 2016 and has not been updated since 2018. An updated Action Plan should reflect the lessons learned in the past four years and include new projects, policies, and priorities. The updated Action Plan should emphasize going beyond preventing traffic deaths, and incorporate strategies for increasing mode shift to active transportation as a metric or goal for implementing safe infrastructure.
- 2. Remove police enforcement from traffic safety:** The City should explicitly reject police enforcement as a Vision Zero approach to improving transportation safety. It is clear that the City of Boston's Vision Zero Task Force has been prioritizing options other than police enforcement, including the removal of a Boston police officer from the Task Force. However, it is key that in the future Action Plan the Boston Transportation Department is explicit that police enforcement plays no role in achieving Vision Zero in Boston. The City should provide robust strategies, solutions, and best practices for achieving their Vision Zero goals free from police enforcement.
- 3. Emphasize mode shift:** Vision Zero safety strategies are often defensive tactics to protect vulnerable road users. The Vision Zero Coalition sees an opportunity for the City to shift and lead its Vision Zero work with the understanding that in order to truly achieve Vision Zero, there need to be fewer single-occupancy vehicles on the road. The City needs to more clearly draw the connection between the shared goals of Vision Zero and mode shift to other forms of transportation, like walking, biking, and transit (as outlined in Go Boston 2030) and should prioritize projects that advance both goals simultaneously. These projects include installing traffic signals that prioritize the safety and mobility of pedestrians and building out the network of separated bike lanes along with other infrastructure that supports mode shift, such as utilizing street space for public transportation infrastructure like bus lanes and floating bus islands.

- 4. Prioritize speed management:** Speed management is a key factor in reducing traffic fatalities. With fewer cars on the road and speeds up last year, 2020 served as a case study for why speed management is so important. The City implemented many short- and longer-term improvements to increase pedestrian and bike safety, yet lacked effective speed management. The City of Boston has deployed speed feedback signs in neighborhoods across the City, but there is currently no process in place to collect this information, which is overwritten every 30 days. We recommend collecting and analyzing data regularly in order to identify problem areas and implement quick-build speed reduction solutions. Rightsizing roads and lane widths to reduce speed also provides a co-benefit of reclaiming space for bike and bus infrastructure. The City has a history of deploying this strategy, and we encourage the continued and expanded use of this approach, especially on the most dangerous arterials.
- 5. Encourage the State to catch up:** While Boston has made progress on its roads, some of the most dangerous roads in the city are owned and managed by the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) and the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR). The City of Boston is in a position to push the Commonwealth of Massachusetts on issues of speed and roads that are dangerous by design. Boston modeled reducing speed limits to 25mph across the city, yet the state has not followed suit on their roadways within the city limits. We encourage city leadership to push the state to meet the City's 25mph speed limit on their roads. Boston can also more actively push for a more rapid redesign and completion of projects on the most problematic state roads, including Morrissey Blvd and Arborway. The City can also support the advancement of automated enforcement legislation – specifically [HD.3705](#), sponsored by Representative Michelle Ciccolo; [HD.2452](#), sponsored by Representative Paul Tucker; and [SD.1962](#), sponsored by Senator William Brownsberger. These specific bills have been carefully crafted to include important equity and data protection provisions. If enacted, automated enforcement as specified in the aforementioned legislation would be an effective tool for speed management and red-light violations, and would provide an alternative to the policing of traffic violations.

Commendations

Although Boston still has a long way to go before traffic fatalities are eliminated and significant mode shift has occurred, the Coalition would like to commend the City on its progress in a few important areas:

- 1. COVID-19 street safety response:** The City showed leadership in incorporating some of the recommendations the Coalition released for municipalities in response to COVID-19, and was able to react in a way that prioritized the safety of essential workers and vulnerable road users. This included progress on key projects such as Connect Downtown, American Legion Highway, and Cummins Highway.
- 2. Downsized street maintenance vehicles:** Boston also gained national attention for purchasing downsized street maintenance vehicles that are able to clean and plow protected bike lanes and other Safe Streets infrastructure. The City's investment in these vehicles illustrates its commitment to not only building safer streets, but also to following through with maintaining them.
- 3. Improved access to crash data:** The City has made progress on their ability to access important crash data from the Boston Police Department. The next step is to ensure the Boston Police Department reports complete crash data to the state, which would significantly improve Massachusetts' ability to conduct state-wide analyses of crash trends.
- 4. Continued transparency in Vision Zero work:** Through holding regular Boston Vision Zero Task Force meetings, the Boston Transportation Department continues to collaborate across departments and with external partners (including the Vision Zero Coalition) about their goals and priorities. This is an important accountability tactic.

Final Thoughts

The City of Boston made its commitment to achieving Vision Zero six years ago, and 2021 will mark five years since the release of their action plan in 2016. The City has much to be proud of, including continuing to reduce pedestrian fatalities during a year when they skyrocketed across the country.

Boston has proven itself to be a national Vision Zero leader. The challenge moving forward will be maintaining momentum as the City recovers from COVID-19, addresses systemic racism, and continues to adapt to an ever-changing context.

Now is the right time for the City to revisit its Action Plan, reflect on how the landscape has changed, and present an updated roadmap to Vision Zero. The City should incorporate an emphasis on decreasing the number of single-occupancy vehicles on the road by increasing mode shift, as well as focus on removing police enforcement from the scope of its plan.

We believe the City is positioned well to execute these recommendations and to continue on the right path toward meeting Vision Zero and Go Boston 2030 goals. The Massachusetts Vision Zero Coalition looks forward to continuing our strong relationship with the City of Boston to achieve our shared goals.

Appendix

- 1 [COVID Recommendations for Cities for Street Safety](#). Massachusetts Vision Zero Coalition. June 16, 2020.
- 2 [2019 Road Safety Statistics: What Is behind the Figures?](#) European Commission. June 11, 2020.
- 3 [MassDOT Crash Portal Dashboard](#). Massachusetts Department of Transportation.
- 4 Pishue, Bob. [2020 INRIX Global Traffic Scorecard](#). March 2020; [Change in Bicycle and Pedestrian Activity by Municipality \(Monthly\), January 2020 through January 2021 vs 2019](#). MassDOT Mobility Dashboard.
- 5 Martinez, Andrew. [Fatal Crashes, Speeding on the Rise in Massachusetts with Clearer Roads amid Coronavirus Pandemic](#). Boston Herald. May 4, 2020.
- 6 Retting, Richard. [Pedestrian Traffic Fatalities by State: 2020 Preliminary Data](#). Governor's Highway Safety Association. March 2021.