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Taller vehicles are more dangerous to pedestrians, even at low speeds, research finds

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Joel Rose



Audio will be available later today.



A study by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety shows higher speeds are worse for pedestrians regardless of vehicle height — but those risks are amplified for vehicles with taller front ends.

Spencer Platt/Getty Images

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Researchers have known for years that speed kills. Now there's growing evidence that height kills, too.

"We looked at how speed and the height of the vehicle converge to really increase the danger to pedestrians even more," said Jessica Cicchino, senior vice president for research at the nonprofit Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

A study of real-world crash data released Tuesday by IIHS shows that higher speeds are more likely to cause serious injuries in pedestrian crashes, regardless of vehicle height. But Cicchino says the risks are magnified for vehicles with taller front ends.

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"We looked at how the risk of a serious injury or fatality increased as the speed in a crash went up," Cicchino said in an interview. "And we saw that it increased much faster for taller vehicles than it did for shorter vehicles."



NATIONAL

Taller cars and trucks are more dangerous for pedestrians, according to crash data

It's the latest study to find that taller vehicles are more dangerous for pedestrians. The majority of vehicles sold in the U.S. are now SUVs and light trucks, which can have front ends that are often 40 inches or taller. Safety advocates say that's one

reason why pedestrian fatalities are up more than 75% since reaching their lowest point in 2009.

Our fondness for larger and taller vehicles prompted Rep. Mary Gay Scanlon, D-Pa., to sponsor a bill that would require federal safety standards for hood height.

"We've seen these standards over time improve vehicle safety with a focus on the people in the vehicle. But this would sort of expand that to pedestrians, bicyclists and people outside the vehicle," Scanlon told NPR in August.



NATIONAL

As cars and trucks get bigger and taller, lawmakers look to protect pedestrians

Federal regulators at the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration have taken steps, too. In September, the agency proposed crafting a rule for vehicle design to try to reduce the number of pedestrians who are killed and seriously injured.

"We have a crisis of roadway deaths, and it's even worse among vulnerable road users like pedestrians," Sophie Shulman, NHTSA's deputy administrator, said in a statement announcing the proposed regulation. "This proposed rule will ensure that vehicles will be designed to protect those inside and outside from serious injury or death."

Car crashes kill more than 40,000 people a year in the U.S., including more than 7,000 pedestrians. Those numbers climbed sharply during the pandemic, but they've dipped slightly over the past two years.



NATIONAL

With pedestrian fatalities mounting, regulators propose tougher vehicle design rules



NATIONAL

Crash prevention technology shows 'huge potential,' but the roadmap is up for debate

There is growing optimism that crash prevention technologies such as automatic emergency braking can help reduce the number of fatalities and injuries. Both safety advocates and the auto industry say that technology holds enormous potential, though there is still debate about its future rollout.

Researchers at IIHS studied more than 200 crashes involving pedestrians ages 16 and older. They drew on records from two databases — one of crashes that took place between 2015 and 2022 in Michigan, and another of crashes that occurred in 2022 in California, New Jersey and Texas.

When they compared their results with a similar study published in Germany, where tall vehicles are less common, researchers at IIHS found that pedestrians in the U.S. begin to suffer more serious injuries at lower speeds.

Those findings suggest that the 25 mph speed limit commonly used in residential neighborhoods in the U.S. might be too high, Cicchino says, particularly in dense urban areas.

"As we have more of these taller vehicles, we need to be paying more attention to what kinds of speeds we want the vehicles to go in areas where there are a lot of pedestrians," she said.

[national highway traffic safety administration](#) [pedestrian deaths](#) [traffic fatalities](#)