

**EXH. PRM-13
DOCKET UE-220216
PSE'S PENALTY MITIGATION
WITNESS: PATRICK R. MURPHY**

**BEFORE THE
WASHINGTON UTILITIES AND TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION**

In the Matter of the Petition of

PUGET SOUND ENERGY

**For Penalty Mitigation Associated with
Service Quality Index No. 11-Electric
Safety Response Time Annual
Performance for Period Ending
December 31, 2021**

Docket UE-220216

**TWELFTH EXHIBIT (NONCONFIDENTIAL) TO THE
PREFILED DIRECT TESTIMONY OF**

PATRICK R. MURPHY

ON BEHALF OF PUGET SOUND ENERGY

AUGUST 19, 2022

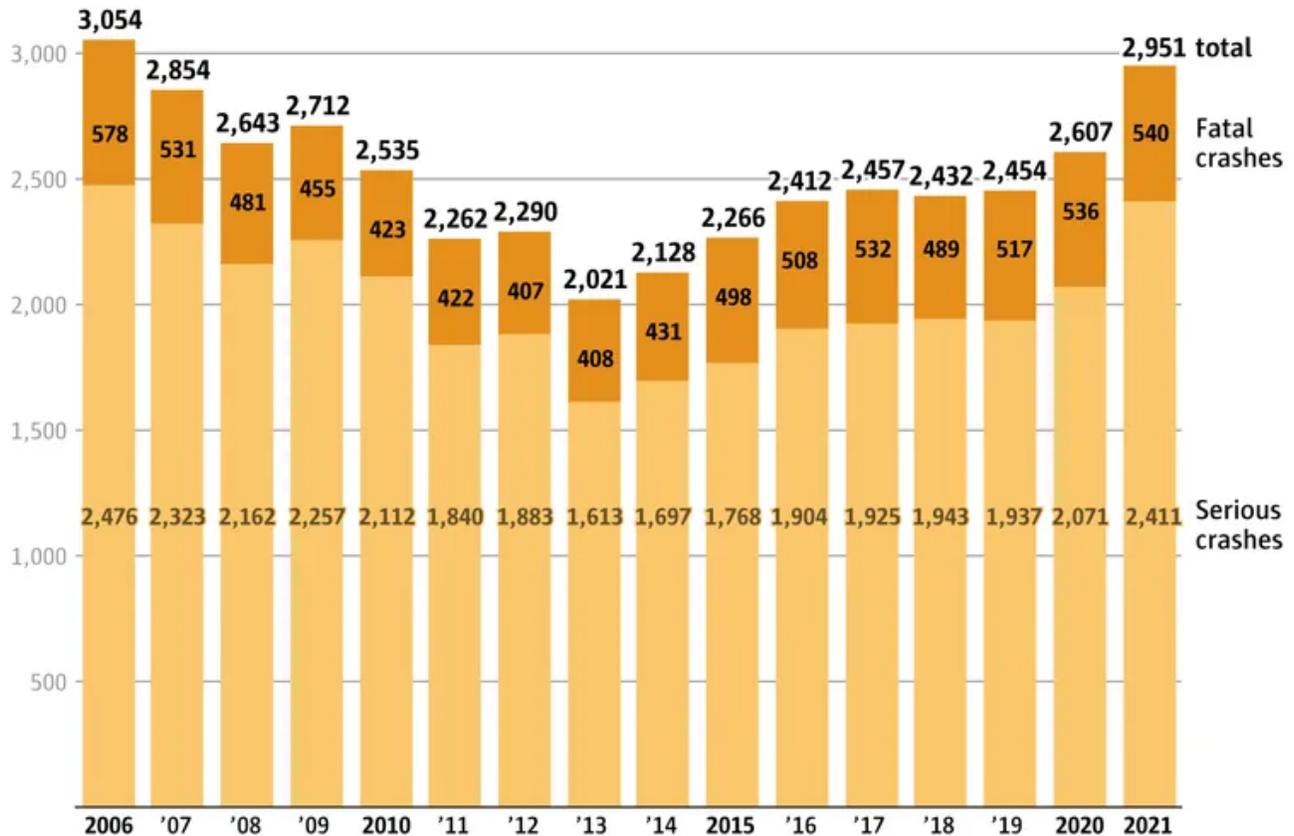
2021 was the deadliest on Washington roads in 15 years, puzzling experts

seattletimes.com/seattle-news/transportation/2021-was-the-deadliest-on-washington-roads-in-15-years-puzzling-experts

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2021: the deadliest and most dangerous year on Washington's roads since 2006

After a surprising jump in 2020, 2021 was even worse.



Note: 2021 data as of Dec. 30
Source: WSDOT

EMILY M. ENG / THE SEATTLE TIMES

As Washington went quiet in the early days of the pandemic, Staci Hoff figured at least it would mean fewer deaths on the roads in 2020. She was wrong.

Then, as cars began returning in 2021, she hoped maybe the carnage would slow as congestion increased and speeds decreased. She was wrong again.

Washington ended 2021 with more fatal and serious car crashes than it's seen in 15 years. On the heels of an especially deadly 2020, the continued rise is a frustrating and increasingly confounding trend that's playing out nationwide. Experts can't point to a single reason.

“We have talked 2020 to death, but it is the end of 2021 and this was way worse,” said Hoff, research director for the Washington Traffic Safety Commission. “The increases that we’re seeing in very serious crashes are not subsiding.”

Washington for the year saw 540 fatal crashes, which killed more than 600 people, according to data from the Washington State Department of Transportation. Not since 2006 have the numbers been that high. In 118 of the year’s fatal crashes, a bicyclist or pedestrian was killed.

An additional 2,411 crashes in 2021 resulted in likely serious injury — also the most since 2006 and 16% more than in 2020.

Alcohol- and drug-influenced serious and fatal crashes remained high in 2021, sustaining a harrowing 25% jump from 2019 to 2020. Speed, too, continued to play an outsized role after climbing nearly 18% in 2020.

In Seattle, 31 people were killed in car crashes in 2021, according to preliminary data from the Seattle Department of Transportation. That, too, is the most since 2006. Jim Curtain, project development director at SDOT, said 19 of those deaths were pedestrians, and nearly half involved hit-and-runs. The city has also seen a jump in impaired driving, Curtain said.

“It’s absolutely discouraging,” said John Milton, director of transportation safety and systems analysis for WSDOT. “It’s our job is to reduce fatal and serious crashes. I think of this as, ‘what if that was my family member out there?’ ”

Counterintuitively, total crashes were lower in both 2020 and 2021 than they’d been in at least the previous 15 years, a sign that the proportion of crashes leading to catastrophic outcomes is through the roof.

For Hoff and other researchers, there’s no single explanation for why this year was worse than last, except that the conditions laid out in 2020 have not receded.

“Nothing is shifting dramatically” from last year, said Hoff. “We had a small uptick in impairment, we had a small uptick in speeding in terms of a factor. More of it is happening, but not one thing is driving it.”

Early in the pandemic, anecdotal reports from state troopers and road workers suggested behavior behind the wheel had become more extreme — a hunch borne out in the rise of speed-related crashes and so-called “aggressive drivers.” As the roads emptied, drivers could more easily hit triple digits on their speedometers.

Combined with a rise in alcohol and drug use, collisions that may have been moderate in 2019 became serious or deadly in 2020.

As traffic returns, 2021's picture is less obvious. Speed and distraction are almost certainly at the trend's core, said Mark Hallenbeck, director of the Washington State Transportation Center at the University of Washington. But there's another, more nebulous cause that's even more difficult to track.

"We have a pissed-off society," he said. "When you are in your big metal box of a car, you have an awful lot of ability to act out your frustrations both with accelerator and brake."

Not just a statistic

It took years for Paul Ossorio to accept that he couldn't have prevented his brother's death. That's what's so different about losing someone to a car crash, he said.

"You feel the guilt, not that you killed them, but like you let their life slip through your fingers," he said.

It was more than 30 years ago that a drunken driver hit his brother, Todd, 20, who was riding his bicycle to the store to buy a Frank Sinatra CD set and biography for their mother's birthday. Now, decades later, a jump in traffic deaths is more than a statistic to Ossorio.

"Each number represents, obviously, that somebody died, but it also represents countless people who are affected," he said. "And that's really the number."

Washington's 6% rise in serious and fatal crashes from 2019 to 2020 was close to average for the country that year, which saw a national 7% spike, according to the National Safety Council.

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Maine, Arkansas and Washington, D.C., experienced the sharpest jumps, each over 30%. Rhode Island saw a 24% increase.

The council hasn't come out with its final tallies for 2021 yet, but preliminary data released in September showed a 16% increase for the first six months of the year. Washington's rise was around 1% — a smaller but nonetheless notable increase.

“The alarming trend in Washington state really highlights the fact that we need to think about how we ensure that if someone does make a mistake that it’s survivable,” said Dongho Chang, WSDOT’s state traffic engineer.

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Hallenbeck of the UW said decades of design decisions have led to this moment. Straight and wide roads, combined with quieter and larger cars, remove sensory clues for drivers, making it easier to speed. The pandemic emphasized the most dangerous parts of those decisions.

“All of our senses tell us to drive quickly unless there’s a bunch of traffic in front of us,” he said. “When we removed it for the pandemic, everybody drove fast. They drove fast, partly because they had no clue how fast they were driving, and partly because they could. So with speeds up, lots of bad things happen.”

At the same time, the cause of the rise in 2021 is proving more complicated to pinpoint than 2020. Traffic levels are nearly back to 2019 levels and the Washington State Patrol had fewer contacts with “aggressive drivers.”

But the stressors of 2020 — isolation, uncertainty, fear — remain. And with them comes an environment still conducive to high speeds, said Hoff, so that “instead of something that may have resulted in an injury in 2019 or 2020, it is a fatality in 2021.”

Preventing crashes

Since the start of the pandemic, police have cut speed-related traffic stops by a third, according to data from the Washington State Patrol. Sgt. Darren Wright said coronavirus precautions are still being taken, which means officers are less proactive.

“They were assessing and trying to figure out how to keep their officers safe,” said Shelly Baldwin, director of the Washington Traffic Safety Commission. “And people kind of knew that maybe they weren’t going to get caught doing the kinds of things that they would have gotten caught doing.”

For some safe-street advocates, however, enforcement should come second to design, especially at a time when police involvement in traffic stops is receiving new scrutiny.

“Preventative measures are better than punitive ones,” said Laura Goodfellow, an advocate for safer streets. “I’d rather have a road where it feels hard and unnatural to speed. It doesn’t really help anyone to be getting tickets.”

Milton of WSDOT said the state is constantly looking for the weak points in the system. He pointed to busy streets with stoplights that drivers ignore, such as Aurora Avenue and Lake City Way, both of which were some of Seattle's deadliest streets, as they've been in the past. The state is working to install more roundabouts, which can cut down on deadly crashes through intersections.

In Seattle, Councilmember Andrew Lewis pushed through a small increase in the city's commercial parking tax to fund safety measures in the city.

"It's not a sufficient amount of money to solve the problem; it is a sufficient amount of money to make a difference," he said.

Seattle has also recently installed new traffic-enforcement cameras, added more bike lanes downtown and redesigned some dangerous streets like Rainier Avenue. Curtin of SDOT said the city will soon partner with WSDOT to make improvements to Aurora Avenue by adding more signaled crosswalks and building out sidewalks on both sides of the street. He also said the city is looking toward receiving money from the \$1.2 trillion infrastructure bill signed into law by President Joe Biden in November, about \$5 billion of which is earmarked for safety grants.

But looking to the future, it's hard to say with any confidence that the trend will quickly reverse.

"If there were easy solutions, trust me, the engineering community would have done it," said Hallenbeck. "But there aren't. There aren't easy solutions because we can't engineer our way out of human behavior."

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