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Prioritizing Black Lives in L.A.'s Traffic Safety Efforts, Revisited

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# Prioritizing Black Lives in L.A.’s Traffic Safety Efforts, Revisited

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## Key Takeaways

- » Traffic violence continues to increase in Los Angeles, aligning with national trends which are associated with increased speeding and a higher proportion of heavier and larger vehicles on the roads.
- » The disparity in fatalities among Black travelers remains disproportionate relative to their population share. Fatalities among Black people rose from 14% in 2013–2017 to 17% in 2018–2022.
- » Black and Latino pedestrians account for one in three traffic deaths citywide.
- » Ample opportunities exist to address these worsening trends, including equitably implementing speed cameras, instituting an immediate crash response approach, and adopting a capital infrastructure plan to prioritize infrastructure improvements.

## Addressing the lack of traffic safety in cities across the United States is more pressing than ever.

In 2020 and 2021, the number of people who lost their lives in traffic crashes rose significantly. In response, the U.S. Department of Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg described this concerning rise in deaths as a “national crisis.”<sup>1</sup> This lethal reality is even worse for people traveling outside of vehicles. According to the Governor’s Highway Safety Association, the total number of pedestrians killed in 2022 was the highest annual number on record since 1981, with an average of 20 deaths per day.<sup>2</sup> In the last decade, the percent increase in deaths among pedestrians has increased three times faster than that of all other types of traffic deaths.<sup>3</sup> Nationally, these trends are associated with increased speeding behavior that has been documented in many

U.S. cities<sup>4</sup>, as well as increases in vehicle size, weight, and proportion of heavier vehicles (SUVs, trucks, and vans) on the roads.<sup>5</sup>

Notably, Los Angeles is no exception to these deadly trends. From 2013 to 2022, the number of people killed in traffic crashes increased by 49%, with substantial year-over-year rises in 2021 and 2022. Mirroring national figures, deaths among people walking in Los Angeles have increased at a faster rate than overall crashes, with a 79% increase over this same period of time. In contrast, this rise in traffic-related deaths comes against a backdrop of Vision Zero, a policy then-L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti adopted in 2015 to eliminate all traffic deaths by 2025. The Los Angeles Department of Transportation (LADOT), alongside other city departments working in the right of way, has implemented a variety of engineering improvements across the city since the program was initiated. However, the scale of need in Los Angeles outpaces the effort — LADOT identified more than 500 miles

of streets in the city's high-injury network. Given the scale of need and worsening trends, the pace of improvements must increase to meet growing concerns.

Our previous analysis of traffic violence in Los Angeles focused explicitly on racial and ethnic disparities in deaths from 2013–2017, a period of time that included the first two years of L.A.'s Vision Zero initiative. In that study, we found that Black victims were overrepresented relative to their share of the city's population in crashes involving every transportation mode. Further, we found that crashes involving Black victims were more likely to result in death. LADOT included these findings in its 2021–2023 Strategic Plan and is committed to remaining steadfast in its goal of achieving Vision Zero, especially within underserved communities. LADOT later reaffirmed this commitment in November 2023 when its leadership noted that Vision Zero was the new General Manager's top priority.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside other city departments, LADOT continues to make significant investments in street safety improvements, with \$138 million in dedicated funding to Vision Zero improvement since 2015. Corridors and intersections where the city has made targeted investments to reduce speeds and crashes are making a notable difference. For example, the number of travel lanes was reduced along Avalon Boulevard in South Los Angeles, resulting in a 6 mph speed reduction along the corridor. Since the degree of injury increases with speed, reducing speeds is a promising outcome. Locations with pedestrian traffic signals, or High-Intensity Activated Crosswalks (HAWKs), have also seen a 65% reduction in crashes.<sup>7</sup> However, even with these significant investments targeting communities of color, it remains evident that progress is not being made at a scale and speed that meets the magnitude of the problem.

Another risk of traffic violence for Black people comes in the form of routine traffic stops. According to the Center for American Progress, Black people are twice as likely to be killed by police than white people. Since 2017, police have killed nearly 600 people during traffic stops nationwide, with 26% of deaths among Black people, who represent 13% of the U.S. population.<sup>8</sup> In addition to a continued commitment to Vision Zero, the Los Angeles City Council directed LADOT to

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conduct a study evaluating opportunities for unarmed traffic enforcement in the city.<sup>9</sup> Findings from this study highlight how LAPD stops Black drivers more frequently than all other racial/ethnic groups and are subject to more actions (e.g., searches, police officers drawing a weapon or using force) from police.<sup>10</sup>

In this brief, we do not purport or intend to evaluate Los Angeles policing practices or the effectiveness of Vision Zero, as an independent evaluation is currently underway. Instead, our goal is to re-examine the racial and ethnic patterns across victims of traffic violence in the five years since the previous analysis was conducted.

### Analysis Approach

For this study, analysis includes traffic collisions from the five most recent years' worth of data, 2018–2022, available from UC Berkeley's Transportation Injury Mapping System database, which provides access to California crash data from the Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System. The 2022 data are still provisional, meaning they should not be compared directly to the year before, but this analysis largely looks at five years collectively. We analyzed the collision, victim, and party files to examine the collision factors, mode,

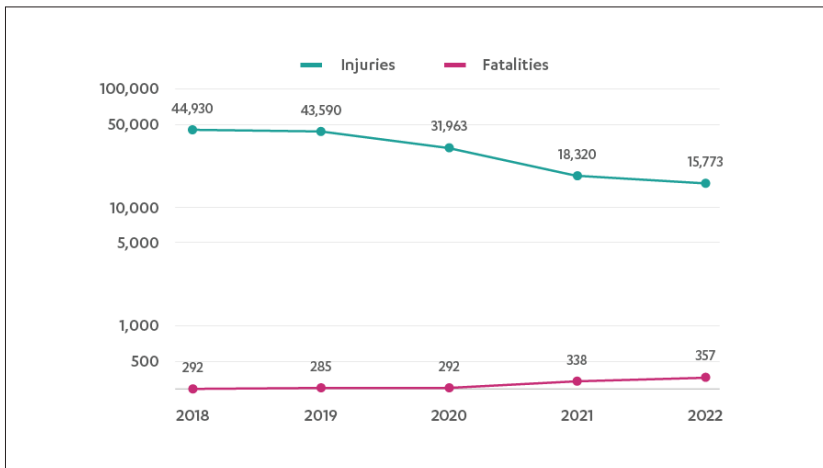
and race/ethnicity for each victim. We then excluded collisions where the victim's race or mode was not explicitly reported. The final dataset analyzed includes 105,262 collisions and 179,096 victims reported in the city of Los Angeles during this five-year interval.

Beginning on Jan. 1, 2021, the Los Angeles Police Department significantly changed its crash reporting protocols. Since this change, the department only takes crash reports for collisions involving severe injuries or fatalities. It does not take crash reports for minor injuries, complaints of pain, or other visible injuries. As a result, this adjustment significantly reduced the number of collisions reported in 2021 and 2022. Due to this change, trends in fatalities versus trends in injuries significantly differ over these five years. The 64% decline in injury collisions over this period directly results

from the change in reporting and should not be interpreted as a legitimate improvement in safety. In contrast, fatalities increased by 22% — a more accurate and reliable reflection of safety trends (**Figure 1**).

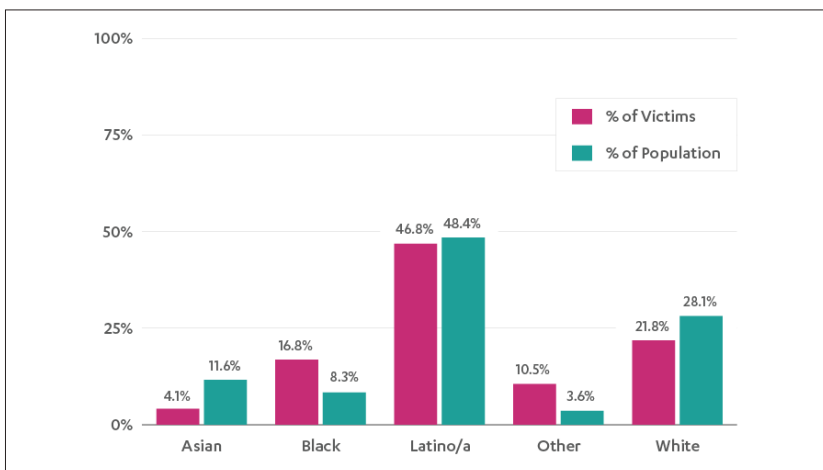
### Black Victims Remain Overrepresented in Traffic Collisions

Black people and people of other racial categories (e.g., American Indian and Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islanders, and multiracial people) are victims of a disproportionate share of traffic violence in Los Angeles. Black people are only 8% of the city's population, yet they represented nearly 17% of traffic collision victims (**Figure 2**). Black people represented 14% of all traffic victims in the



**Figure 1.**

Number of collisions resulting in fatalities or injuries in the city of Los Angeles, 2018–2022



**Figure 2.**

Traffic collision victims by race, compared to their percentage of the total population in Los Angeles, 2018–2022

**Table 1.**

Number of victims by race and severity of collision

	Fatality		Injury		No Injury		Total
<b>Asian</b>	30	2.1%	5,120	4.2%	266	3.4%	5,416
<b>Black</b>	302	21.2%	20,553	16.8%	1,185	15.1%	22,040
<b>Latino/a</b>	719	50.4%	56,691	46.4%	4,134	52.6%	61,544
<b>Other</b>	87	6.1%	12,892	10.6%	782	10.0%	13,761
<b>White</b>	288	20.2%	26,872	22.0%	1,487	18.9%	28,647
	<b>1,426</b>		<b>122,128</b>		<b>7,854</b>		<b>131,408</b>

prior five-year period analyzed, from 2013 through 2017. This comparison demonstrates that the likelihood of being a traffic violence victim is worsening for Black travelers.

Black people are more likely to be traffic collision victims, but they also are more likely to be involved in crashes that result in their deaths (**Table 1**). Black victims represent 21% of all fatal crash victims, the most overrepresented of any racial/ethnic group. Concerningly, the proportion of Black fatal victims also increased from 16% in the previous period. Meanwhile, Latino victims represent the highest absolute number of fatalities, with 719 deaths in this period, a stark increase from the 424 deaths reported during the 2013–2017 period.

Across every mode of travel, Black victims continue to be overrepresented in traffic collisions. Black pedestrians,

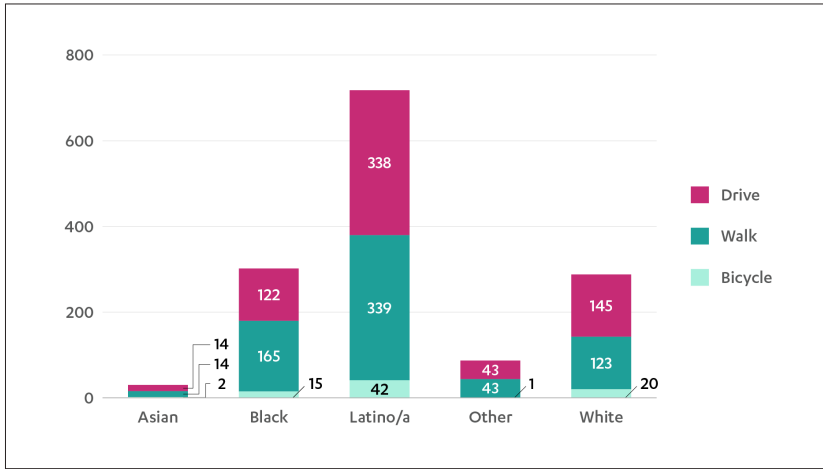
specifically, face the highest disparities, representing 17% of all collision victims — more than two times the city’s Black population. Latino cyclists represent the majority of bicycling victims, while their representation among both cycling and pedestrian victims is closer to the proportion of their overall demographic representation (**Table 2**).

Across all racial/ethnic groups, Los Angeles remains a dangerous place for people to walk. Pedestrian deaths accounted for 48% of all fatal victims, which is an increase from 43% in the 2013–2017 findings. With a combined total of 504 deaths among Black and Latino pedestrians out of 1,426 fatalities recorded from 2018–2022, Black and Latino pedestrians collectively represent one in three fatal traffic victims (**Figure 3**).

**Table 2.**

Percent of traffic collision victims broken down by mode and race, and compared to their share of the city’s population, with columns totaling to 100%

	L.A. City Population	Drive	Walk	Bicycle	Other
<b>Asian</b>	11.6%	4.4%	2.4%	1.9%	3.1%
<b>Black</b>	8.3%	16.1%	21.9%	19.1%	17.3%
<b>Latino/a</b>	48.4%	46.3%	48.7%	52.7%	51.2%
<b>Other</b>	3.6%	11.2%	6.9%	4.2%	6.3%
<b>White</b>	28.1%	22.0%	20.1%	22.1%	22.1%



**Figure 3.**  
Number of fatal traffic collision victims broken down by race, then by mode of transit

## Policy Recommendations

As traffic violence has continued to worsen across Los Angeles, the consequences disproportionately impact Black and Latino victims, their surviving families, and the traumatized communities that are left to navigate dangerous corridors on a daily basis.<sup>11</sup> Given this context, we recommend the following actions to equitably address the increasingly deadly conditions of our streets in the short, medium, and long term:

### Take a harm reduction approach to implementing speed cameras

As of January 2024, California Assembly Bill 645 gave Los Angeles and five other cities authority to pilot speed safety system programs that allow for speed cameras. As these cities plan for their pilot programs, they must thoughtfully consider the potential harms related to speed cameras throughout the implementation process and address them accordingly. Existing literature demonstrates the effectiveness of speed cameras in reducing speeds and improving safety; however, the effectiveness rates vary based on street configurations, hours of camera operations, and comparison sites selected. A systematic review of 14 studies found 12–65% reductions in injuries and 17–71% reductions in deaths near speed camera locations.<sup>12</sup> This review highlights that cameras effectively reduce fatalities and injuries, although the magnitude can vary greatly. In a recent study of 146 camera locations across

Chicago, authors estimated a 12% reduction in overall crashes and a 15% reduction in severe injuries and deaths.<sup>13</sup>

One common concern with speed cameras is the inequitable burden of fines and fees on low-income people, especially considering that fines tend to escalate with non-payment and can ultimately lead to the suspension of driving privileges.<sup>14</sup> The enabling legislation limits the fines that cities can collect through speed safety programs. Violations are only issued when someone travels at least 11 mph over the speed limit, with the first violation receiving a warning and a second violation assessed at \$50 for travel at 11–15 mph over the posted speed limit.<sup>15</sup> These fines are also assessed as a civil penalty, not affecting someone’s license status.

As cities implement AB 645, the planning process must address concerns about camera placement and targeting of the driving behaviors in communities of color.<sup>16</sup> Since most of L.A.’s high-injury network is located within communities of color, one approach to camera placement would be to focus specifically on these areas. However, this would also contribute to higher exposure to speed cameras for low-income drivers of color compared to higher-income white drivers. Instead, Los Angeles should consider placing a relatively equal number of cameras in all council districts. While council districts across South Los Angeles have the most miles within the high-injury network, all districts have at least 10 miles where speed cameras could be placed to help slow drivers and reduce crashes.

### **Institute an immediate crash response approach**

The city of Los Angeles should consider creating an immediate crash response approach to better understand and respond to the conditions that create crashes. This concept would bring together representatives from multiple city departments and offices into the field to capture the conditions that are contributing to the crash. Additionally, it would start a collective dialogue around effective responses. The field team would include staff from the Department of Transportation, Bureau of Engineering, Police Department, and appropriate council offices. It is not uncommon for teams from different departments to come together in other transportation crisis responses, such as a major fire or bridge collapse — and this concept can draw from a similar approach.

In 2019, Portland's Vision Zero Strategy instituted a deadly crash response protocol. After deadly traffic incidents, the city conducts an emergency engineering evaluation of potential low-cost infrastructure changes and quickly moves any interventions into design and implementation. Additionally, the city installs variable message signs at crash locations that give the date of traffic deaths and tell drivers to "travel with care." Having a clear and immediate response to traffic fatalities and severe injuries, such as the one implemented in Portland, shows the victims and their families a commitment to working to prevent similar tragedies from happening in the same locations.

### **Create a citywide capital infrastructure plan to prioritize infrastructure improvements**

There is overwhelming agreement that changing infrastructure is the most important factor in slowing vehicles and improving road safety. The current approach to planning for infrastructure improvements is through one-year Vision Zero action plans. To maximize impact, the city should adopt a multi-year capital infrastructure plan to prioritize the physical changes that need to be made in order to save lives. Local nonprofit, Investing in Place, is currently leading a campaign for Los Angeles to create a Capital Infrastructure Plan that would inventory all aspects of the public right-of-way and provide a budget and strategic vision for improving

infrastructure. Capital infrastructure plans are an opportunity to create a long-term vision through developing project lists that are ready to capitalize on funding opportunities as they arise. These plans also ensure that cities invest in projects that are aligned with desired outcomes to reduce crashes and prioritize racial equity.

In reviewing Capital Infrastructure Plans across 30 U.S. cities, Investing in Place highlighted key elements that can help inform a future approach for Los Angeles,<sup>17</sup> including:

- » Create a capital projects map to let the public and city departments know exactly which projects are included in the plan.
- » Comprehensively inventory assets, including repair and maintenance.
- » Ensure that racial equity departments and teams have explicit roles in development, and create a process for prioritizing projects based on equity and need.
- » Allow people to submit project recommendations in their respective neighborhoods.
- » Convene a cabinet of managers from key departments to meet regularly, thus increasing coordination and information sharing.

### **Conclusion**

In cities across the U.S., transportation planning has long been used to police the mobility of people, specifically people of color — and Los Angeles is no exception. In recent years, Los Angeles has experienced worsening patterns of racialized traffic violence. Too many lives have already been lost in devastating and preventable collisions. Moving forward, Los Angeles has the opportunity to reverse these deadly trends. By addressing the problem with urgency and as a means to elevate race in the conversation around traffic violence and prevention, Los Angeles can work toward a future where Vision Zero is no longer a vision but a reality.

## About the Authors

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