

# WRONG WAY: BLACK AUTO DEATHS UP IN WISCONSIN

*Recent years brought a sharp increase in deaths of black Wisconsinites in motor vehicle crashes, and long-term trends saw the rate of such deaths overtake those of white and Hispanic Wisconsinites and all black Americans. Many of these fatalities occurred in Milwaukee, which saw a sharp increase in speeding-related fatalities. Local officials have raised concerns about a reckless driving epidemic; several other factors are also worth considering.*

From 2013 to 2018, the motor vehicle crash fatality rate for black, non-Hispanic Wisconsinites nearly doubled on an age-adjusted basis, according to data from the federal Centers for Disease Control (see Figure 1). In raw numbers, motor vehicle deaths for black Wisconsinites increased from 31 in 2013 to 39 in 2014, 56 in 2015, and 62 in 2016. They hit a high of 79 in 2017.

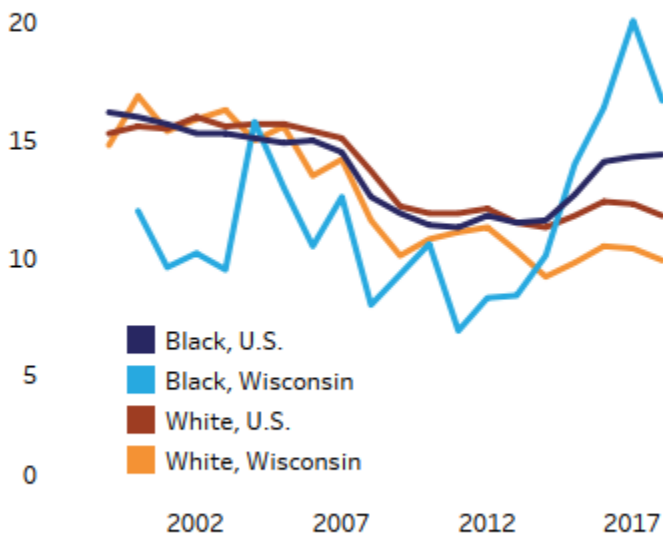
Such deaths declined to 63 in 2018, the most recent year for which CDC data is available. But with the exception of 2017, the raw total and age-adjusted rate for black Wisconsinites in 2018 remained higher than any other year since 2000, the first year for which data are available.

While motor vehicle crash fatality rates also increased slightly from 2013 to 2018 for white and Hispanic Wisconsinites, and somewhat more for all black Americans, the increase was far greater for black Wisconsinites. The end result is that black Wisconsinites – who not long ago had lower motor vehicle fatality rates than white or Hispanic Wisconsinites or their national black peers – by 2018 had become more likely to die in a motor vehicle crash. The age-adjusted rate of motor vehicle fatalities per 100,000 residents for black Wisconsinites was 16.7 in 2018, compared to 9.9 for white Wisconsinites, 8.6 for Hispanic Wisconsinites, and 14.4 for black Americans.

Taking a longer-term view also shows how black Wisconsinites have taken a different path than others in the state or their national peers. From 2001 to 2018, the motor vehicle crash death rate for black Wisconsinites increased 74% on an age-adjusted basis. The same measure declined 35.7% over the same period of time for white Wisconsinites, 17.3% for Hispanic Wisconsinites, and 8.3% for all black Americans.

Vehicle fatality data compiled by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), while not identical due to differences in methodology, shows the same pattern. The NHTSA data show nearly two-thirds of the motor vehicle fatalities for blacks in the state occurred in the city of Milwaukee, roughly matching the share of the state’s black population that resides there. In Milwaukee and the rest of the state, black motor vehicle fatalities have increased sharply since 2013, the data show.

**Figure 1: Black Wisconsinites’ Fatality Rate Diverges**  
Age-Adjusted Motor Vehicle Crash Deaths per 100,000



Source: Centers for Disease Control WONDER Database



Both Milwaukee County and the city of Milwaukee have seen an overall increase in motor vehicle fatalities in recent years, as well as an increase in the number of motor vehicle fatalities that involved speeding. At the same time, Milwaukee-area community leaders and public safety officials have heard growing concern from residents in recent years about an increase in reckless driving incidents. A recently established Carjacking and Reckless Driving Task Force made up of Milwaukee city and county leaders has taken public testimony on the issue and recently issued recommendations on ways to tackle the problem.

A few potential factors to explain the trend have been cited in public discussions about reckless driving. They include changes to a Milwaukee Police Department policy that from 2010 to 2017 made it less likely officers would pursue reckless drivers, and changes that restricted access to affordable driver's education classes for students in the Milwaukee Public Schools for a period of more than a decade ending in 2016.

In addition to data on speeding and fatal crashes, other potential factors we note here include the economic cycle and its relationship with motor vehicle fatalities, and declining transit ridership in the Milwaukee area.

### LONG-TERM SHIFT

The Forum's research on this topic emerged from our [previous report](#) on the decline in life expectancy in Wisconsin and racial disparities in top causes of mortality in the state. When we examined those disparities more closely, we found a stark contrast in accidental death rates among black Wisconsinites relative to white Wisconsinites and all black Americans. The white-black gap between motor vehicle fatalities helps account for this disparity.

The two datasets used for this report include both motor vehicle victims who died at the scene of a crash and those who died later from crash injuries. The USHTA data only include fatalities occurring within 30 days of a crash, while the CDC has no time restriction. The USHTA data only include fatalities from crashes involving "a motor vehicle traveling on a trafficway customarily open to the public," while the CDC data include both traffic and non-traffic motor vehicle fatalities.

The inclusion of age-adjusted mortality rates allows for better comparisons among different population groups and across time, since the prevalence of nearly all types of death varies by age.

### LOWER UNEMPLOYMENT; GREATER SPEED

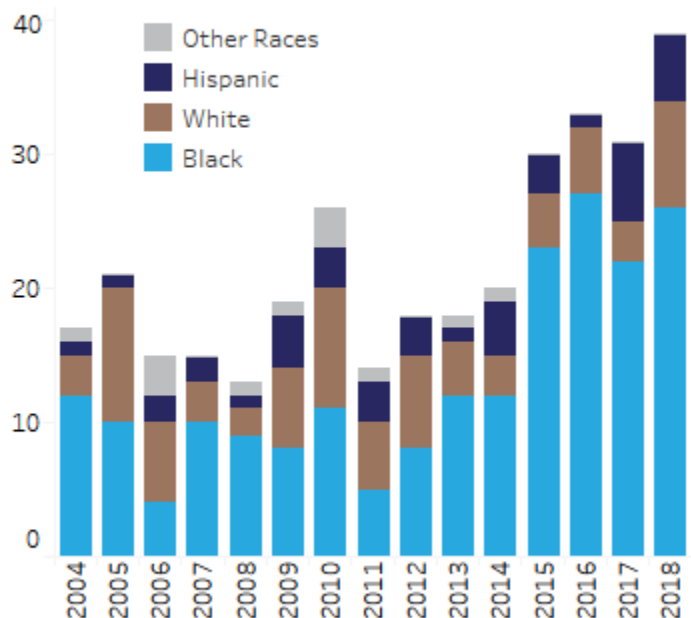
Comparing motor vehicle fatality trends in the city of Milwaukee to the rest of the state exposes a sharp contrast. In Milwaukee, fatalities increased 97% from 2013 to 2018. In the rest of the state, fatalities increased 3% during that span.

A similar trend emerges in motor vehicle fatalities involving speeding. These are defined by NHTSA as instances in which the driver's speed was related to the crash as identified by law enforcement on an accident report. In Milwaukee, such fatalities increased 117% from 2013 to 2018. In the rest of Wisconsin, speeding-involved fatalities decreased 8% in that time.

Comparing the trend in Milwaukee to the rest of the state illustrates how the state's largest city is an outlier in speeding-involved fatalities, as illustrated in Figures 2 and 3. They have increased 117% in Milwaukee from 2013 to 2018, and 129% from 2004 to 2018. In the rest of the state, speeding-involved fatalities decreased 8% from 2013 to 2018, and 47% from 2004 to 2018.

The period from 2013 to 2018 largely has been one of nationwide economic growth. Past research has shown motor vehicle fatalities generally decline during

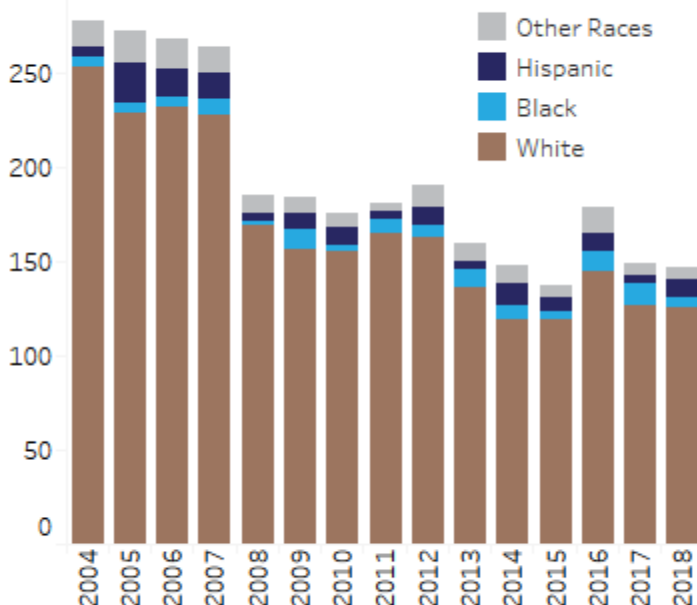
**Figure 2: Speeding-Involved Fatalities Increasing**  
Speeding-involved fatalities by race for Milwaukee



Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Fatality Analysis Reporting System



**Figure 3: Speeding-Involved Fatalities Decreasing**  
Speeding-involved fatalities by race for the rest of state



Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration Fatality Analysis Reporting System

economic downturns and increase during periods of expansion. Reasons for this are debated, but possible causes include factors such as more workers being employed and driving more while commuting to work, and an increased volume of large truck traffic.

From the 2011 peak in unemployment following the last recession to 2018, U.S. Census Bureau data show a greater share of black Wisconsinites moved from unemployed to employed status than either white residents in the state or blacks nationally. Black Wisconsinites saw a 15.3-percentage-point shift from unemployed to employed status, compared to a 4.3-percentage-point change for white Wisconsinites and 9.0 percentage points for all black Americans. Census Bureau data also showed during the period a much greater proportional rise in blacks in Wisconsin who reported driving alone to work compared to whites in the state or blacks nationally. That suggests there may have been a larger percentage increase in the number of miles driven by African-Americans in Wisconsin.

### OTHER POSSIBLE CONTRIBUTORS

Reckless driving has become a significant concern in recent years for Milwaukee residents. Steps taken by local leaders include heightened enforcement by local police and a request by city of Milwaukee officials to

Gov. Tony Evers for additional state funds to combat the problem. Milwaukee city and county officials also have created a task force that is hearing public testimony and crafting recommendations to curb reckless driving.

Heightened enforcement by Milwaukee police stems in part from changes to a departmental policy that previously restricted instances in which officers could conduct vehicular pursuits of reckless drivers. In 2010 the police department revised its pursuit policy to specify that for officers to pursue a suspect, they must have probable cause to believe that a violent felony has occurred or is about to occur. In response to mounting community concerns about reckless driving, this policy was revised again in September 2017 to specify that officers could pursue a vehicle engaged in reckless driving if “the vehicle or occupant(s) present a clear and immediate threat to the safety of others.” A 2018 report by the Milwaukee Fire and Police Commission showed police pursuits increased sharply after the policy was revised.

Some observers also have cited a period of more than a decade during which free driver’s education was not available in Milwaukee schools. The state discontinued funding to school districts for driver’s education in 2004. While driver’s education classes remained available to students for a fee, this may have contributed to an income-based gap in access to driver’s education. In 2016, Milwaukee schools introduced a program by which high schoolers could take driver’s education courses for free, with the only cost being a \$35 fee to obtain a learner’s permit. Yet many of today’s Milwaukee motorists came of age during the years when access to free driver’s education was limited.

In addition, Milwaukee County’s transit ridership has declined at a faster rate than the nation as a whole. By one key measure, transit ridership in Milwaukee County declined about 40% from 2008 to 2018, compared to a 6% decline nationally, according to the Federal Transit Administration’s National Transit Database.

This is notable because transit is a safer mode of transportation than automobile travel. A study by the American Public Transportation Association found it is 10 times safer on a per-mile basis when comparing rates of injury and death. As is true nationally, African-Americans in Milwaukee rely on transit more on a per-capita basis than other large racial or ethnic groups,



according to U.S. Census Bureau survey data compiled by Governing Magazine.

## CONCLUSION

The increase in motor vehicle fatalities among Wisconsin's black residents is a complicated phenomenon, and this report does not presume to fully account for its causes. Rather, we hope to highlight the problem and a few potential contributors, many of which already were raised by community members and local leaders in Milwaukee.

The complexity of the problem also means solutions must be considered carefully. In October, the city-county task force on reckless driving released its draft report with recommendations including:

- Asking state lawmakers to increase criminal penalties for adults who engage in reckless driving or flee police;
- Consideration of red-light cameras;

- Greater police enforcement and prosecutorial efforts to combat reckless driving;
- More usage of traffic engineering measures shown to reduce speed and enhance safety, such as narrower roadways, pedestrian islands or traffic signals, roundabouts, or speed bumps;
- Increased programming and funding for driver's education in Milwaukee high schools and technical colleges.

A look at the auto fatality numbers in Milwaukee shows how the problem has escalated and reveals its disproportionate impact on African American residents. While a great deal of attention has focused on the perceived increase in reckless driving in the city, other factors are also worth considering. We hope this report provides important context and adds urgency to efforts to reverse this tragic trend.

