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SLOW DOWN TO SAVE LIVES

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NEW YORK, May 20, 2022 -- The news on the traffic safety front is quite discouraging. Two research reports have come out in the past week from the Governors Highway Safety Association with estimates on traffic fatalities last year. The numbers are frightening.

GHSA says deaths in 2021 on our nation's roads and highways have risen to a 16-year high of 42,915, an increase of 10.5 percent from 2020. At the same time, pedestrian fatalities have skyrocketed to a 40-year high of 7,485, an 11.5 percent increase over the previous year.

The most common contributor to these tragic numbers is speed, along with alcohol impairment, followed by distraction. All of these factors can be easily limited, since they are the result not of "accidents" but of conscious decisions made by drivers.

We know all too well the reasons not to drink and drive. Thanks to the longtime efforts of groups like Mothers Against Drunk Driving and others, social mores have changed and drunk drivers are now viewed by most as social pariahs.

Speeding, however, is seen in a different light. Most of us drive too fast and sometimes exceed posted speed limits. Speeding is generally seen as a harmless, if annoying, thing. After all, we're all in a hurry. The relatively small penalties for speeding generally reflect that "we all do it" attitude.

But the reality is speed can make a difference between life and death on the road. It's a matter of physics. The faster you're going when you hit something – or someone – the more severe the impact will be. Higher speeds mean an exponential increase in the risk of serious injury or death. Speeding-related deaths rose by five percent last year, the GHSA report shows.

The solution is painfully simple. Slow down.

A bit of planning ahead can help keep you on time without feeling the necessity to speed.

Passengers, who comprise about 62 percent of all traffic fatalities, can also help by speaking up when in a vehicle being driven too fast or too aggressively. Don't worry about being called a back-seat driver. After all, it's your life at risk, as well as the driver's and live of others on the road or on sidewalks alongside the road. Let the driver know you're speaking up because you value your life and that of the driver.

There's so much more that can be done to drive the tragic numbers down, including "road-calming" infrastructure like roundabouts and lane-narrowing road markings. We support such efforts that are promoted in many cities by local Vision Zero initiatives.

But much of the change will come from personal choices each of us can make when we drive. It's painfully obvious and simple.

Slow down, and pay attention, to save lives.

Michelle Anderson is Director of Operations at The National Road Safety Foundation, a non-profit group that for 60 years has been promoting safe driving behavior. The Foundation has free resources on a range of driver safety issues, for educators, traffic safety advocates, parents and young drivers. Visit www.nfrs.org