

TRAFFIC SAFETY & ENFORCEMENT



Managing Risk

The number of officers struck by vehicles in 2021 is the highest it has been in the past decade. **By Joe Vince**

Just a few days before Christmas, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Officer Mia Goodwin was directing traffic at a crash scene along a North Carolina highway.

The mother of three—including a 4-month-old infant—had recently returned from maternity leave and had arrived at the Interstate 85 collision at around 10:30 p.m. on Dec. 21 to relieve colleagues. She had been at the scene for a few hours when the second crash happened.

Two tractor-trailers collided before slamming into police vehicles. Those cruisers then struck Goodwin and three other officers.



Officer Mia Goodwin
Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department

The other officers were taken to the hospital and later released. Goodwin was pronounced dead at the scene shortly after 3:30 a.m. Dec. 22.

"Today, Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department is hurting," Chief Johnny Jennings said during a news conference following Goodwin's death. "We mourn the loss of a police officer... a good, good one. And the profession hurts, our city hurts."

Even before the pandemic, roadside safety was already an increasing concern for police officers. States like Ohio and Illinois have strengthened their existing move over and slow down laws, while departments around the country continually try to raise public awareness.

Since the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020, overall fatal traffic accidents have been increasing at a time when fewer drivers have been on the road, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Agency estimates for the first quarter of 2021

showed a 10.5% increase over the same period in 2020 despite a 2% drop in vehicle miles traveled.

The second year of the pandemic has also seen a spike in traffic fatalities among law enforcement officers. Traffic-related law enforcement deaths were up by 38% in



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◀ **Traffic-related law enforcement deaths were up by 38% in 2021, with 58 officers killed compared to 42 deaths in the previous year.**

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2021, with 58 officers killed in 2021 compared to 42 deaths in the previous year, according to the the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial Fund (NLEOMF).

In fact, the number of officers struck by vehicles in 2021 is the highest it has been in the past decade. In 2020, 15 officers were fatally struck, and a total of 19 in 2019; 27 officers were killed in 2021, the NLEOMF reports.

"We are seeing an increase in speeding violations, people driving under the influence, texting while driving and they're not following Scott's Law," Illinois State Police Trooper Haylie Polistina tells OFFICER Magazine, referring to the state's move over law named after Chicago Fire Department Lt. Scott Gillen, who was fatally struck at a 2000 crash scene by a drunk driver. "These are the violations that are contributing to these fatal accidents and Scott's Law-related crashes."

Nearly halfway across the country, California Highway Patrol Officer Ramondo Alexander has personally witnessed similar driving behavior. Instead of fewer vehicles on the road creating a safer traffic environment during the pandemic, he believes that open freeways enticed some motorists to drive more recklessly.

"During the pandemic, I saw a lot more vehicles speeding," says Alexander. "There were a lot more vehicles making unsafe lane changes and violations like that, so there's a little increase in reckless driving."

"I would call it a violation of opportunity," he adds. "If there's no one to enforce it at that particular time, some people take advantage of it. And during the pandemic, I think there were quite a few people taking advantage of the freeways being empty."

Alexander says he was routinely pulling over drivers traveling more than 90 mph during the pandemic. And those speed violations can inflict more damage than simply a fine.

"I did see an increase in major injury collisions because you're traveling at a faster rate, it's going to cause more damage to the cars and there are probably going to be major injuries to the involved parties," he says. "So I did see an increase in that, because when you have the opportunity to speed, there are going to be people out there who are going to speed because the freeways are clear."

That threat of physical danger also extends to officers and troopers working along roadsides.

"When troopers are out there making these traffic stops, they're aware that the vehicle coming behind them might not be paying attention to what they're doing and be incapable of moving that vehicle out of harm's way by the time they realize there's a danger," says Lt. Craig Cummings of the Texas Department of Public Safety.

Keeping your head on a swivel

Officers can be particularly vulnerable and exposed during traffic stops and working crash scenes. That's why troopers need to balance their attention between what's going on in the vehicle and the surrounding environment, as well as conducting a thorough investigation, says Cummings.

And it's that situational awareness that can alert an officer to potentially life-saving clues.

"It takes a tremendous amount of training and experience—of doing it day and day out—to know what the sound of the average road tire is coming down the highway when it's tracking like it should, as opposed to when that tire starts to drift a little too close. There are tiny little nuances that the officer or trooper at large will pick up on."

Alexander also preaches the need to multitask while responding to roadside calls. Officers must keep their heads on a swivel and try to remove as many dangerous variables, especially given driver behavior during the pandemic.

"There are a lot of things that go into conducting a traffic stop. If you can eliminate some of the elements to get the job done safely, then do so," he says.

"When I turn on those lights and I'm getting ready to stop some vehicle, the first thing I think of is I want to get through this contact safely," adds Alexander. "That's the first thing that goes through my head. The next thing that goes through my head is getting this vehicle pulled over to the right, either to the shoulder or off the freeway completely."

Getting vehicles off the freeway and on to surface roads when possible during stops is one of the safety techniques that Alexander was doing before the pandemic. He also continues to offset his patrol vehicle.

"I'm hoping that the patrol vehicle will be pushed away from me so it doesn't hit me, if that makes sense," he says.



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One of the biggest safety assets during the pandemic, however, has been Alexander's fellow officers.

"As coworkers, we all back each other up if we can," he says. "Let's say my beat partner made a stop, and I'm not doing anything and I hear him make a stop, I'll go assist him. I'll go there and help him out with scene safety or just an extra set of eyes to make sure everything goes according to plan."

In Texas, the Department of Safety is arming its officers with one of the best weapons they can have: information. Intelligence is gathered and used to schedule troopers not only to high crime areas, but also high traffic areas.

"We've actually hired analysts and made it very clear we need targeted data that helps us determine where resources need to be placed," Cummings says.

"We're consistently trying to deploy our resources and use our resources in an effective way that relies on the intelligence we've gathered so we can better serve our communities," he adds.

The department also has put together task forces in order to reduce move over accidents in certain parts of the state. Troopers also work closely with the department's partners throughout Texas as a "force multiplier."

It's a practice that the Illinois State Police also employs. Officers work with the Illinois Department of Transportation and local police and fire departments to help with safety concerns, whether that means providing more lights, vehicles or personnel for traffic control, says Polistina.

While the increased danger of reckless driving during the pandemic can create additional stress for troopers, it

can also be a motivator for officers to follow their safety procedures and pull over dangerous violators.

"We're really going to try to do our best to make it known that this isn't going to be a tolerated driving behavior," says Polistina.

Spreading the word

Along with stopping traffic violators, citations can be effective ways of raising awareness about driving safety and move over laws. In 2020, Illinois strengthened the penalties for violations to Scott's Law, while California recently allowed points to be added to license for multiple distracted driving offenses.

"I'd rather issue a citation to remind you this is dangerous versus you getting into an accident because you were on a cellphone and you hurt yourself or someone else," says Alexander.

The onus of staying safe isn't simply being placed on law enforcement. Departments around the country continue to blanket the public with messages concerning safe driving. In Texas, videos dealing with tire pressure and other issues have been put online, and in California, digital billboards and social media remind drivers about traffic laws and safe driving behavior.

Although Alexander doesn't know the official effectiveness of such campaigns, he says he's personally noticed motorists are beginning to become more aware of the need to move over and slow down around traffic stops and accident scenes.

"People get comfortable driving in their vehicles. They travel the same route, day in and day out. They maybe see a patrol car making a traffic stop along that route," says Cummings. "And if we're not consistently pushing that message out—slow down and move over—then someone may not realize... as they're approaching that traffic stop, they have no idea if this is someone being issued a warning for a minor traffic violation or this is someone who has a warrant for murder and is intent on not going back to prison."

Even though traffic numbers have increased during the pandemic, that hasn't changed the key element to handling a roadside call. It comes down to one word, according to Alexander.

"It's safety, safety, safety," he says. "At the end of the day, when I take off this uniform, I'm a person and there's someone back at home who loves me... I want to make it home. So I'm going to do everything possible so that I make it home safe and the person I've stopped makes it home safe. So that's what goes through my head when I make a traffic stop."

"What I would tell another officer: Keep safety in mind. Do what ever you need to do to get home safely," he adds. 🚔



Before the pandemic, roadside safety was already a concern for officers and lawmakers, as states like Ohio and Illinois strengthened their existing move over and slow down laws.

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