

ARTICLE

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Pedestrians Beware: Road Fatalities On The Rise In New Jersey



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By the first week in July, New Jersey roads had already claimed close to 300 lives, including a 36.5 percent rise in pedestrian fatalities. Numbers weren't just up, they were skyrocketing. In sharp contrast to the nearly 20 percent drop in road casualties in 2008, the news was especially disheartening.

So What's Going On?

In New Jersey, drivers are legally required to yield to pedestrians in both marked and unmarked crosswalks. Still, at many intersections, drivers come to rolling stops or don't stop at all. Right turns on red, without proper surveillance, continue to cost lives. Many drivers seem to ignore crosswalks and fail to proceed with caution. This forces walkers to sprint across traffic to try and avoid being hit.

Pedestrians aren't without blame in the matter and New Jersey law also mandates that pedestrians be aware of the traffic and not cross in front of cars that are too close to stop. Many have called for pedestrians to take greater responsibility in the matter and follow the adage of "look both ways."

Still, New Jersey police officers are targeting drivers first in their efforts to curb accidents involving pedestrians. Starting on August 13th, 17 police departments in New Jersey implemented the "Cops in Crosswalks" program, reminding drivers of the need to stop for people crossing the road.

During the program, plainclothes police officers, stationed at trouble spots, are posing as pedestrians trying to cross the street. If a driver does not stop to allow them passage, he or she will be pulled over and could be issued a fine or, at the very least, a firm reminder.

The program runs through September 13th.

In Pennsauken, New Jersey, over 500 drivers were pulled over during two four hour operations along a single stretch of road. Among these, more than a few found themselves ticketed for cell phone use. In New Jersey, handheld devices are completely banned while driving unless a driver is using an ear piece or blue tooth.

Distraction on the road is generally regarded as one of, if not the, greatest causes of New Jersey car accidents. New Jersey is one of a few states with a complete handheld ban, but more and more are banning, or considering banning, things like text messaging on the road and all phone use in certain areas, like school zones.

However, pedestrians are victims of distraction just as often and, though it's not a crime to walk and talk — people need to be aware of where they are and what's coming. Crosswalks are designated walking zones, but they are not designated safe zones. The right-of-way means precious little if the approaching car does not stop.

In New Jersey, there is the hope that police intervention will stem the rise in road fatalities, but the best solution is surely one that involves mutual awareness on the part of both drivers and pedestrians.