

## Stroll and Roll Back to School Safely: Reviving Commuter Awareness about Pedestrian Safety

The days are a little cloudier, the skies a little darker, and pedestrians wrapped in coats and obscured by the fall gloom may be a little harder to see. Rain and frost, too, can increase the risk of traffic dangers. And speeding and distracted driving can contribute to injury and even death. It's National Pedestrian Safety Month, but how can we keep pedestrians safe?



Bay Area highway deaths were down by [5%](#) in 2020. "You would expect that because there were a whole lot fewer folks on the road," explained MTI's Deputy Director Dr. Hilary Nixon, to NBC Bay Area in a recent [article](#) on the spike in 2021 traffic deaths. However, children across the nation have returned to in-person schooling after a long hiatus, and many adults find themselves required to leave the house to work again, and so there is an increase of all kinds of traffic on roads—and on sidewalks.

Sadly, this combination of motor vehicles and pedestrians can too often lead to tragedy. Recently, crossing guard Ashley Dias was [struck and killed](#) while protecting students from an oncoming SUV near [Stanley Middle School](#). Unfortunately, this is just one incident of many thousands that occur each year. It is imperative we understand the impact of these events and draw an important lesson from them about remaining vigilant behind the wheel at all costs.

Pedestrian safety [data](#) from the California Office of Traffic Safety (OTS) shows that pedestrian deaths rose 26% percent between 2014 and 2018. In California, the pedestrian fatality rate is almost 25% higher than the U.S. average.

A driving force behind these numbers is distracted driving. Pedestrians can use [safety tips](#) to protect themselves, including using crosswalks correctly and walking only on the sidewalk, but drivers carry the weight of prevention. Unfortunately, the percentage of drivers manipulating hand-held electronic devices, including cellphones, has [increased](#) in recent years. The draw of social media, work emails, and even digital navigation means that more and more of us want to "just" glance at our phones and tablets. In one study, texting behind the wheel [dramatically](#) increased the likelihood of being in an accident. According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), [5.3%](#) of drivers on the road are using their phones at any given time each day. In 2019, [3,142](#) people died because of distracted driving.

To carve away at these numbers, the selected theme for the 2021 Mineta Transportation Institute's (MTI) [Elementary Poster Contest](#) is "Stroll and Roll Back to School." Students

compete to create a poster communicating an important message about how to stay safe while commuting to school. By submitting a poster, first to sixth-grade students enrolled in a Santa Clara County elementary school can earn a field trip, a pizza or ice cream party, and cash prizes, but, most critically, they learn about pedestrian safety.

Pedestrians and drivers alike can make choices to protect everyone on the road. Drivers should focus on the road--not on their phones--and avoid speeding, another critical factor [increasing](#) the likelihood of a traffic injury or fatality.

Looking forward, many local and national agencies are making [progress](#) in reducing roadway collisions, injuries, and deaths. The National Center for [Safe Routes to School](#) (SRTS) helps communities embrace the joy of walking and biking to school by advancing safety. MTI recently partnered with California Safe Routes to School in two research projects centered on implementing, assessing, and expanding SRTS programs. The findings from those studies can be viewed in the webinar "[Safe Routes to School in 2021: Let's Walk the Walk.](#)" SRTS also organizes the national Walk to School Day held every October and Bike to School Day held each May. Likewise, the [Road to Zero Coalition](#), which aims to improve safety and eliminate traffic deaths, released comprehensive guidance in 2018 with the goal of ending roadway deaths by 2050.

As individuals, it is our personal responsibility to reflect on the risks we take each time we step outside the house and each time we get behind the wheel. Thousands of people die each year on our roads. By remaining alert and making other smart choices, you can keep people safe and even save lives.