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LI's 'selfish' need for speed Crashes linked to speeding in 2024 that involved deaths or serious injuries increased almost 65% compared with 2019

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Cars playing cat and mouse on the Southern State Parkway.

Motorists regularly pushing 90 mph on the Long Island Expressway.

Drivers casually blowing through stop signs and hitting excessive speeds in residential neighborhoods.

On Long Island roadways, crashes that lead to serious injuries or death often do not involve a singular cause.

Sometimes drugs or alcohol are at play. Other times, it's the weather or motorists driving aggressively or while distracted.

But one thread connecting the bulk of the most serious crashes on Long Island is speed.

"People don't realize just how dangerous speeding is and how much they're increasing the risks of having an accident by routinely speeding," said Stuart Cameron, chief of the Old Westbury Police Department and a former chief of the Suffolk County Police Department. "They need to just slow down. They'll really get to the same location, just maybe a few minutes later than they would otherwise. But they'll get there much safer. . . . Probably the most dangerous thing that people do on Long Island is to drive their cars." 'Selfish' decisions Motorists driving at excessive and often dangerous speeds, experts contend, is arguably the most vexing problem plaguing the Island's roadways - one that lends itself to few easy solutions.

"Everyone seems to think that where they need to go is more important than where everyone else is going," said Michael Bushwack, chief of the Nassau County District Attorney's Vehicular Crimes Bureau, adding the combination of speed and other factors, such as alcohol or drugs, has been historically responsible for the worst crashes on the Island. "It's selfish."

From enhanced driver education and beefed-up enforcement to lowered speed limits and improved road designs, experts contend there are a multitude of ways to reduce Long Islanders' need for speed.

But in a region where most of its 3 million residents use a vehicle to get to work or school or to navigate their daily lives, Long Islanders' desire to quickly get where they're going has made the roads increasingly dangerous, according to data analyzed by Newsday and interviews with more than a dozen traffic safety experts, law enforcement officials and victims of speed-related crashes.

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On Long Island, 65 people were killed in 2024 in crashes where police determined that speed was a contributing factor, up from 51 such fatalities in 2019, according to data from the Institute for Traffic Safety Management & Research in Albany. Across the Island, speed was a factor in more than 35% of all fatal crashes in 2024, the data shows.

Meanwhile, crashes involving serious injuries spiked to a 10-year high in 2024, at 353, according to Institute data.

In total, speed-related crashes involving death or serious injuries leapt almost 65% compared with 2019, the figures show.

And speed-related fatal crashes are not just an Islandwide problem.

Speed-related fatalities leapt almost 32% statewide from 261 in 2019 to 344 in 2024, the traffic institute data shows.

"Basic science says the faster you go, you hit something, the more impact it's gonna have," said Daniel Donza, a former NYPD officer and lead driving instructor at the police academy, who now works with the Skip Barber Driving Academy, a program offered by Skip Barber schools. "The more impact it's gonna have, the more serious injuries you're gonna have." "Magnifying the risk" State police Capt. Vincent Augeri said speeding has been a factor in all but one crash involving serious injuries or fatalities that he's responded to during his 23-year career, including nine in Nassau.

"You can design the safest road in the world," Augeri said. "You put someone on there, and they speed, and it is now the most dangerous road in the world, for themselves and the commuting public."

A Newsday analysis found police in Suffolk have issued significantly fewer dangerous-driving tickets than other parts of New York when adjusted for traffic.

But Suffolk Police Commissioner Kevin Catalina said the department has "turned a corner" on enforcement, pointing, in part, to a 30% increase in the size of its Highway Patrol unit.

"If somebody speeds, then there's a good chance that person is going to disobey other areas of the law when it comes to driving as well," Catalina said. . . . "If it's just speeding, that's a danger factor. But if you put speeding together with unsafe lane changes and disobeying traffic signals, now, you're talking about magnifying the risk."

Nassau police ticket drivers at a higher rate, but enforcement there still hasn't fully recovered since the pandemic, when ticketing plummeted statewide, Newsday found.

"Our numbers have been slowly increasing, but are we at where we were in '19? Nope. Are we getting there? Yes. Will we get there? I don't need to get there if everybody's working together," Nassau Police Commissioner Patrick Ryder said. "If I can get the community to work with their kids, their family members, and say, 'Slow down, be careful. Don't be distracted driving. Don't be on your cellphone. Don't be adjusting the radio and everything else. Let's focus on our driving and be safe.' "

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The number of speed-related fatalities on Long Island spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic, to 78 in 2021 and 77 one year later, as motorists, unencumbered by the region's typically high traffic volumes, revved their engines faster than in the past, often with deadly consequences, traffic safety experts contend.

"During the lockdowns, there were so few vehicles on the road that those who were on the road essentially had it to themselves," said Robert Sinclair, spokesman for AAA Northeast. "And they developed a lot of bad habits. A lot of speeding. . . . Then, as traffic started coming back, those people who were engaging in those bad behaviors did not change their behavior."

Nationally, there were 11,775 fatalities and 332,598 people seriously injured in speed-related crashes in 2023, accounting for almost 30% of all traffic fatalities and 14% of total injuries, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Nearly 40% of motorists nationwide who were involved in fatal speed-related crashes also were legally intoxicated, while almost 30% did not have a valid driver's license at the time of the crash, the NHTSA data shows. Deadly consequencesThe consequences of driving on Long Island roadways at excessive speeds, particularly under the influence of alcohol or narcotics, can far exceed an expensive ticket or even a night behind bars.

Empress Henderson, of Massapequa, lost her son Xavier Parris, 26, in 2022 when he was in the back seat of a Dodge Charger, driven by his friend's stepfather, that hit a tree at 97 mph. The speed limit in the area was 30 mph.

The driver, Donnell Hill, a former Metropolitan Transportation Authority bus driver, who was drunk, pleaded guilty to aggravated vehicular homicide, second-degree assault, driving while intoxicated and other charges. He was sentenced to 5 to 15 years in prison.

"I will never be the same. I was devastated. I believe for about a year and a half, I was just moving in a state of shock," Henderson said. "How could this happen? Is this a nightmare? Every morning that would be the first thing I would wake up and ask myself. 'Am I living in a nightmare?' And even now, 'Is this really real? Is my son not here?' And I always come back to this. This should not have happened. This did not have to happen."

Nearly 2½ years after her sister and brother-in-law were killed in a horrific crash in Laurel Hollow, Crismair Rodriguez, of Oyster Bay, is finally addressing the grief that upended her life.

The driver, Sotirios Spanos, of Syosset, had a blood alcohol level twice the legal limit more than three hours after the Aug. 12, 2023, collision that killed Ismenia Urena and her husband, Odalis Urena, prosecutors said. Law enforcement determined Spanos was driving 100 mph 2½ seconds before the crash, and nearly 85 mph at impact.

Spanos pleaded guilty to aggravated vehicular homicide, two counts each of second-degree manslaughter and second-degree assault, and driving while intoxicated and was sentenced to 7 to 21 years in prison.

Rodriguez, who was named the guardian of her sister's two daughters, age 17 and 10, said she's had to rearrange her entire life, moving from Brooklyn to Oyster Bay, and had to leave her job with the New York City Board of Education.

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"I'm still in survival mode," Rodriguez said in a recent interview. . . . "Now I'm actually dealing with the grief. So I have anxiety. I don't leave the house after a certain time."

Marge Lee also knows firsthand the dangers of excessive speeding.

More than 35 years ago, a heavily intoxicated motorist, traveling at double the speed limit, collided head-on into Lee's vehicle in New Jersey, killing her 25-year-old son, Kenny, and leaving the Franklin Square mother with severe, life-altering injuries. The 25-year-old drunken driver, married and with an infant at home, was killed on impact.

"I have a wonderful family. A loving family. We have fun. But Thanksgiving, Christmas, any family gathering - is somebody missing?" said Lee, who created DEDICATEDD or Drive Educated Drive Informed Commit And Totally End Drunk Driving to combat drunken and reckless driving on Long Island and to provide education about the dangers of speeding. "There could be 100 people around my table. But there is an empty seat." No easy solutions. While traffic safety experts generally agree speeding on Long Island roadways - whether it's the Long Island Expressway, Sunrise Highway or low-density municipal streets in towns and villages - is a problem, finding a permanent solution invokes far less uniformity.

In recent years, local leaders have employed a "kitchen sink" approach to reducing speeds.

On major highway or parkways, motorists may encounter electronic signs that display a vehicle's speed, along with a warning to slow down. Meanwhile, the state has reconfigured exit ramps on the Southern State Parkway, added rumble strips to the William Floyd Parkway and installed work zone speed cameras on the LIE.

On less-traveled local roadways, safety countermeasures include roundabouts, speed humps, street trees, medians, bicycle lanes and so-called "road diets" that convert an undivided four-lane roadway into a three-lane roadway consisting of two through lanes and a center two-way left-turn lane.

Eric Alexander, director of Vision Long Island, a downtown planning organization based in Northport, said while Long Island is making progress in reconfiguring its roads, it continues to have some of the most dangerously designed arteries in the country, because of the combination of its high levels of suburbanization and unusually wide lanes that encourage speeding because of the "buffer zones" between other vehicles.

"There's no one-size-fits-all solution. Community by community, it needs to be tailored by the neighborhood and the land uses around it," Alexander said, noting traffic-calming measures in Ridge, which lacks a major commercial district, will be far different from downtown Glen Cove or Hempstead. "So there's lots of different treatments you need to apply based on the land use. And it's not just about getting a car from point A to B at the most efficient speed." An 'avoidable' danger The State Department of Transportation said it's embarked on a host of traffic calming measures on Long Island in recent years, including a lowered speed limit on Route 347 in eastern Suffolk; narrowed lanes and new traffic signals on Route 109 in Farmingdale; and pedestrian safety improvements to Route 25 in downtown Smithtown.

"Speeding is avoidable - it is dangerous, and it can be deadly," Transportation Department spokesman Stephen Canzoneri said in a statement. "There is no question that speeding makes crashes worse on Long Island and across

New York State."

Michael Shenoda, a traffic engineering professor at Farmingdale State College, said many Long Island roads are designed specifically for higher speeds, with few curves and wide lanes and shoulders.

"They're designed for vehicles to be, in some cases, not only the primary users of the roadway, but the only users of the roadway. There's not even a thought or concern given to pedestrians, bikes or any other kind of traffic on the roadway," said Shenoda, who is working on a study examining the psychology of speeding, and whether driver behavior can be altered through a combination of better signage, enhanced law enforcement and more extensive driver's education programs. "So I think there's definitely an inherent design aspect that encourages that's very hard to pull back on."

Then there are the cars themselves.

Modern vehicles take significantly less time to accelerate and can stop much more quickly than cars made a generation earlier.

Combine modern vehicular technology with poor road design and today's fast-paced society, experts said, and the result is little surprise: motorists who feel more comfortable driving at high speeds that were once considered dangerous.

"Vehicles have gotten more and more insulated from the outside world, so you don't feel the speed as much as you're driving," said Elissa Kyle, placemaking director at Vision Long Island. "It used to be that your car would shake if you're going too fast. Now you really don't feel that at all. . . . I think it's a combination of factors, but our roads do let us go a lot faster than is safe for most places." "It can end your life! While countless options could be employed to reduce speed on Long Island, one previously enacted idea, officials said, is not under consideration.

In 2014, Nassau lawmakers unanimously approved a countywide school zone speed camera program. From September through November, the program generated more than 400,000 tickets and \$24 million in revenue, figures show.

But lawmakers, besieged by furious constituents who complained about tickets being generated on weekends when school was out, and at locations where required warning signs were not in place, voted unanimously to end the program in December 2024.

A Nassau County spokesman said there's no plan to revive the school zone speed camera program, even as New York City has continued to expand a similar initiative it began in 2022.

Meanwhile, the state has doubled the number of work zones included in a program that tickets motorists for speeding through highway construction sites. State officials said the Automated Work Zone Speed Enforcement program has resulted in an average reduction of vehicle speeds of 10 mph.

State Sen. Michelle Hinchey (D-Saugerties) has introduced legislation that would provide municipalities outside of New York City, including on Long Island, the authority to reduce area-wide speed limits from 30 mph to 25 mph

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without expensive, state mandated engineering studies. The bill, which Hinchey said has the potential to dramatically improve safety on Long Island roads, has the support of the New York Association of Towns.

"Our belief is that local communities know the roads that they live with every day," Hinchey said. "And if they are seeing that lowering the speed limit will save lives, we should make it as easy as possible for them to be able to do that."

Ultimately, the most lasting long-term solution to address the region's speeding crisis, according to law enforcement officials, is through the education of young drivers.

The Nassau County District Attorney's Office, Bushwack said, visits dozens of high schools each year, educating drivers about the dangers of speeding, driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol and texting while driving.

"This is not brain surgery. This is not groundbreaking stuff," Bushwack said. "If you go 90 mph on the Southern State Parkway, there's a good chance you're going to crash. And if you do, someone's going to really get injured or killed, potentially even yourself . . . so education is key."

Donza, the former NYPD driving instructor, said teenage drivers make up a large majority of speed-related fatalities.

He cited a sense of "invincibility and overconfidence," saying drivers are not as good as they think they are.

"The hospitals are filled with people that think they can do it," he added. "The cemetery is filled with people that realized they couldn't do it. And speed? It can end your life like that."

Newsday's Arielle Martinez contributed to this story.

THE SERIESEvery 7 minutes on average,

a crash causes death, injury

or significant damage on

Long Island. Find out more

about LI's dangerous roads in Newsday's exclusive yearlong series at

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Find all reported motor vehicle crashes between 2022

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Search for recent fatal crashes.

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