

Tucson's Second-Deadliest Roads in America

Tucson's roads feel dangerous. Here's the data: among America's cities of 500,000 or more, only Memphis has a higher death rate.

WHO READS THE DATA

We read the crash record the way we read a case: the people, the rate, and the pattern underneath them.

AZ Law Now pulled the federal fatality record and the Census population counts and computed the per-capita traffic death rate ourselves, for Tucson and Pima County against every comparable city and county in the country. It names no one and sells nothing. It just shows the work.

675

people died on Tucson's roads, 2020 to 2024.

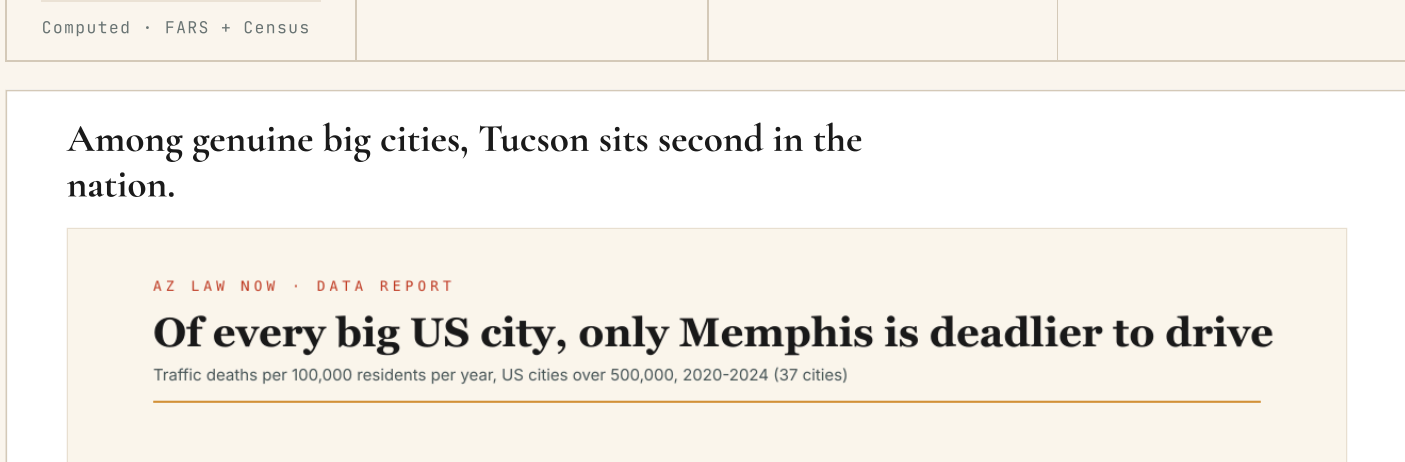
#2 OF EVERY US CITY OF 500,000-PLUS, BEHIND ONLY MEMPHIS.

24.95 DEATHS PER 100,000 RESIDENTS A YEAR.

01 Of every big US city, only Memphis is deadlier to drive

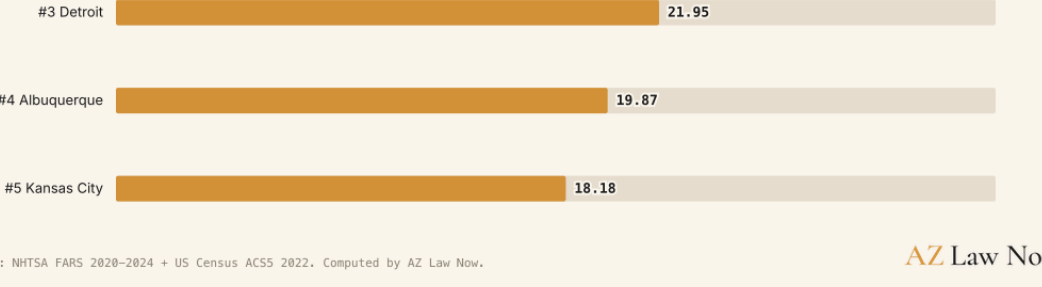
OUR ANALYSIS

We ranked every US city with 500,000 or more residents by traffic deaths per resident, 2020 through 2024, and only one city came out deadlier: Memphis. Tucson's rate, 24.95 deaths per 100,000 residents a year, ranks #2 of 37 big US cities.



Of every big US city, only Memphis is deadlier to drive

Traffic deaths per 100,000 residents per year, US cities over 500,000, 2020-2024 (37 cities)



Source: NHTSA FARS 2020-2024 + US Census ACS5 2022. Computed by AZ Law Now.

AZ Law Now

We hold the comparison to cities of 500,000 or more on purpose. It's a fair peer group, big enough that a handful of crashes can't swing the rate, and Tucson still lands second from the bottom among genuine big cities. If you drive in Tucson, you're driving on some of the most dangerous big-city roads in America.

Computed from NHTSA FARS 2020 to 2024 (traffic fatalities) and US Census ACS 5-year population estimates. Rate = five-year death count over resident population, per 100,000 per year.

WE STATED THE UNIVERSE ON PURPOSE

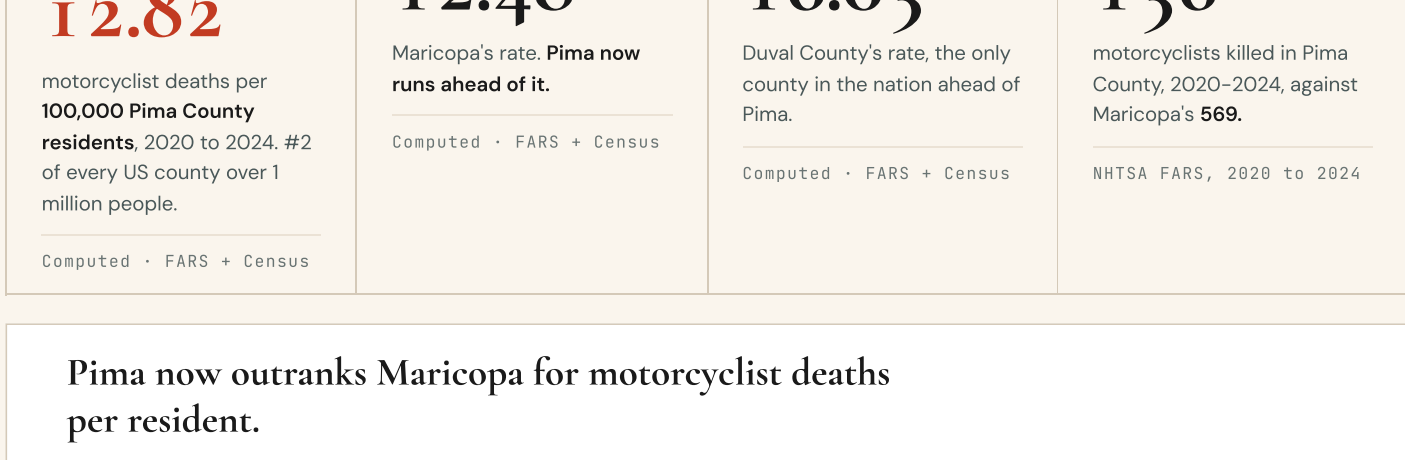
"Every US city with 500,000 or more residents" is a transparent, rule-based set, drawn straight from Census population, not a list we hand-picked to put Memphis on top and Tucson second.

Of 336 Census places above 100,000 residents, 324 matched cleanly to a federal crash record. Thirty-seven of those clear the 500,000 floor, and Tucson ranks second across every one of them.

02 Pima's motorcyclists die at a higher rate than Maricopa's

OUR ANALYSIS

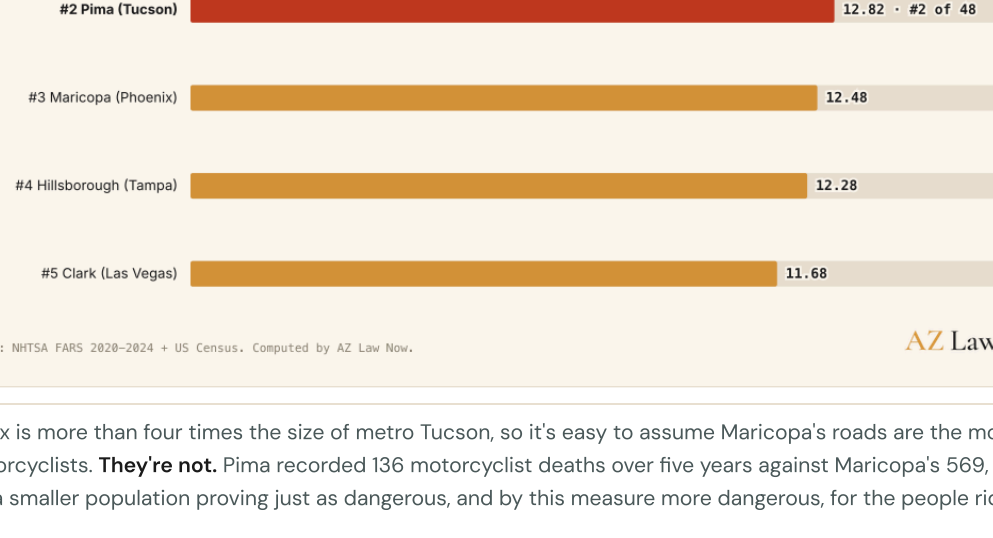
Zoom into the county around Tucson, and a common assumption about Arizona's biggest cities breaks down. Pima County's motorcyclist death rate, 12.82 per 100,000 residents from 2020 to 2024, is higher than Maricopa's 12.48.



Pima now outranks Maricopa for motorcyclist deaths per resident.

Pima's motorcyclists die at a higher rate than Maricopa's

Motorcyclist deaths per 100,000 residents, US counties over 1 million people, 2020-2024 (48 counties). Only Duval County, FL is worse.



Source: NHTSA FARS 2020-2024 + US Census. Computed by AZ Law Now.

AZ Law Now

Metro Phoenix is more than four times the size of metro Tucson, so it's easy to assume Maricopa's roads are the more dangerous ones for motorcyclists. They're not. Pima recorded 136 motorcyclist deaths over five years against Maricopa's 569, a smaller county with a smaller population proving just as dangerous, and by this measure more dangerous, for the people riding on two wheels.

Computed from NHTSA FARS 2020 to 2024 and US Census population, every US county with 1 million or more residents (48 counties).

03 More than half of Tucson's deaths are outside a car

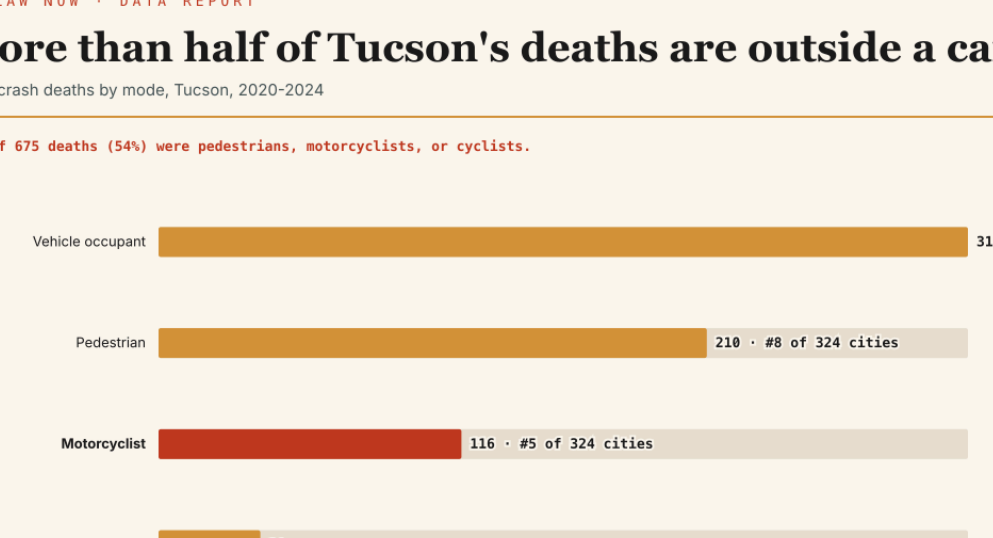
OUR ANALYSIS

Cut Tucson's death toll a different way, not by rank against other cities, but by who is actually dying on these streets. More than half the people killed here weren't inside a car.

More than half of Tucson's deaths are outside a car

Fatal crash deaths by mode, Tucson, 2020-2024

365 of 675 deaths (54%) were pedestrians, motorcyclists, or cyclists.



Source: NHTSA FARS 2020-2024. Computed by AZ Law Now. "Vehicle occupant" excludes motorcyclists, counted separately.

AZ Law Now

If you walk, bike, or ride a motorcycle in Tucson, this is the risk you're taking on: more than half of everyone these roads killed between 2020 and 2024 was someone outside a car, not behind a windshield.

Computed from NHTSA FARS 2020 to 2024, Tucson. Pedestrian, motorcyclist, and cyclist deaths counted at the person level.

04 Tucson's traffic deaths have roughly doubled

OUR ANALYSIS

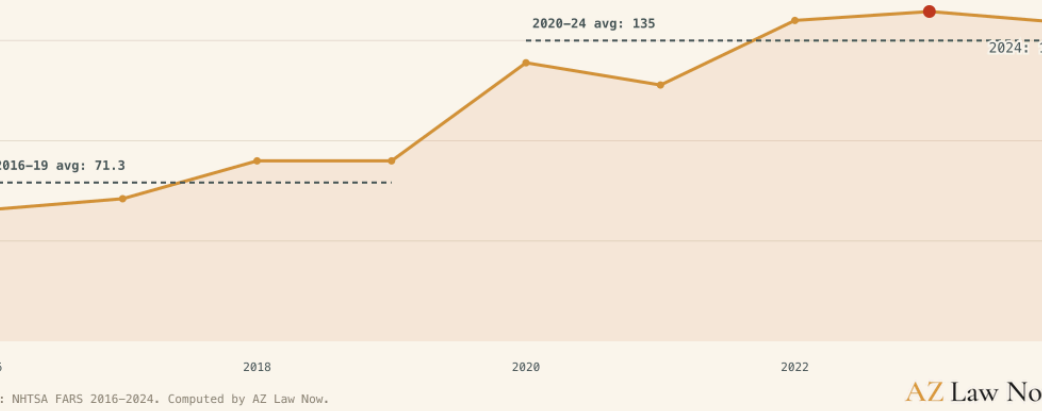
This isn't a new normal Tucson has always lived with. It's recent, and it's getting worse. From 2016 through 2019, an average of 71.25 people died on Tucson's roads each year. From 2020 through 2024, that average jumped to 135 a year, nearly double.



Annual deaths climbed from a 71-a-year average to 135.

Tucson's traffic deaths have roughly doubled

Fatal crash deaths in Tucson, by year, 2016-2024. Compare 2016-19 to 2020-24.



Source: NHTSA FARS 2020-2024. Computed by AZ Law Now.

AZ Law Now

We can't say for certain why the increase happened. The federal fields that used to track contributing factors like speeding or distraction stopped being recorded nationally starting in 2020, a gap in the federal record itself, not a question we chose to skip. What the numbers do show, without question, is that this isn't a one-year spike. It's held for five years running.

Computed from NHTSA FARS 2016 to 2024, Tucson, by year.

Put the four findings together: America's second-deadliest big city to drive in, a county where motorcyclists now die faster than in metro Phoenix, a toll where more than half the dead were never in a car, and a five-year climb that shows no sign of reversing. The rate is the story.

WHAT THIS MEANS

Among America's biggest cities, only Memphis is deadlier to drive in than Tucson, and Pima County's motorcyclists now die at a higher rate than Maricopa's. Knowing where the risk concentrates, and that it isn't slowing down, protects families and the public.

We read the record so you get answers.

QUESTIONS ABOUT ARIZONA'S ROADS? YOU GET ANSWERS

(602) 654-0202

05 How we built this

METHODOLOGY

PRIMARY SOURCES ONLY

Every figure traces to a named federal dataset: NHTSA's FARS, the federal record of every traffic death (2016 to 2024, 2020 to 2024 for the rate comparisons), and the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey 5-year estimates for the denominators. We read the source, not the news write-up.

WE COMPUTED THE RATES

The per-capita rates and rankings are ours. A motorcyclist, pedestrian, or cyclist death uses the federal person-type and body-type codes, counted at the person level. We divided the five-year death count by the resident population, per 100,000, applied identically to every city and county. These are not NHTSA-published figures.

WE STATED THE UNIVERSE

The big-city ranking covers every US place with 500,000 or more residents, 37 of 324 matched cities. The motorcyclist ranking covers every US county with 1 million or more people, 48 counties. Tucson is FARS city code 530, distinct from South Tucson and Corona de Tucson.

THE TWO CAVEATS WE WANT STATED PLAINLY

First, the rate is a five-year cumulative count over the resident population, so it reads about five times higher than a single-year rate would. Second, we tried to pull what's driving the increase, speeding, distraction, and similar factors, and couldn't: those federal fields stopped being recorded nationally in 2020, a gap in the record itself, not something we chose to omit.

The same construction is applied identically to every city and county in this report, so each ranking is a fair like-for-like read. The analysis reproduces from the raw federal files, so any figure can be rebuilt from the record.

PROVENANCE · EVERY HEADLINE NUMBER

MEASURED read directly from a published dataset. COMPUTED our calculation from the federal counts. VERIFIED re-tested against the omitted-set attack.

HEADLINE FIGURE	PROVENANCE	SOURCE
Tucson #2 of every US city over 500,000 for traffic-death rate · 24.95 per 100,000 · 675 killed, 2020-2024	COMPUTED	NHTSA FARS 2020 to 2024 + US Census ACS 5-year estimates
Memphis #1 at 35.55, ahead of Detroit (21.95), Albuquerque (19.87), Kansas City (18.18)	COMPUTED	NHTSA FARS 2020 to 2024 + US Census (US cities over 500k)
Pima County motorcyclist rate 12.82 per 100,000 beats Maricopa's 12.48	COMPUTED	NHTSA FARS 2020 to 2024 + US Census (Pima, Maricopa counties)
Pima #2 of 48 US counties over 1 million for motorcyclist deaths, behind Duval County, FL (16.03); Maricopa #3	COMPUTED	NHTSA FARS 2020 to 2024 + US Census (US counties over 1M)
136 motorcyclists killed in Pima County vs. 569 in Maricopa, 2020-2024	MEASURED	NHTSA FARS, Pima and Maricopa counties
365 of 675 Tucson deaths (54%) were pedestrians, motorcyclists, or cyclists: 210 ped, 116 moto, 39 cyclist	COMPUTED	NHTSA FARS 2020 to 2024, Tucson, by travel mode
Annual deaths: 71.25/yr avg (2016-19) to 135.0/yr avg (2020-24), +89%, peak 148 (2023)	COMPUTED	NHTSA FARS 2016 to 2024, Tucson, by year
Universe: 324 of 336 Census places over 100k matched a FARS city record; 37 clear the 500k floor	MEASURED	US Census ACS 5-year estimates (2022), crosswalked to FARS city codes

REFERENCES

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. (2025). *Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) 2016 to 2024 national file* [Data set]. U.S. Department of Transportation. <https://www-fars.nhtsa.dot.gov/>

U.S. Census Bureau. (2023). *American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates, 2022 (place and county population)*. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/acs>

A pedestrian, cyclist, or motorcyclist death uses the NHTSA FARS person-type and body-type codes, counted at the person level. Per-capita rates and the rankings are computed by AZ Law Now from the FARS counts over US Census population denominators. They are not NHTSA-published statistics.

Rates are a five-year cumulative death count over the resident population, per 100,000 per year, applied identically to every city and county. "Tucson" means the city; "Pima County" means the surrounding county. This report is public-interest data journalism, not legal advice, and creates no attorney-client relationship.