

Why Bicycle Deaths in New York City Are at a 23-Year High



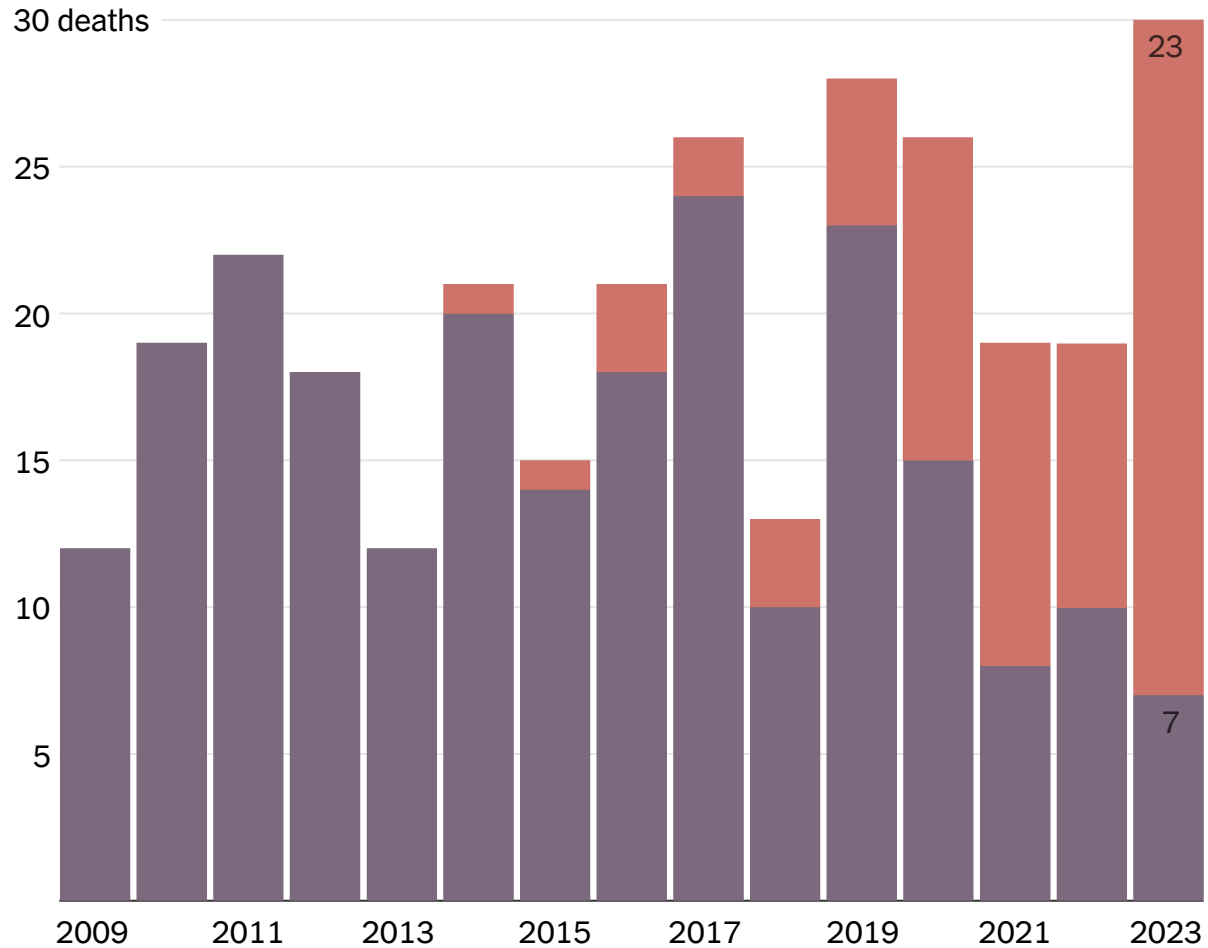
By Keith Collins

March 5, 2024 Updated 11:11 a.m. ET

Last year was the deadliest year for cyclists in New York City since 1999, according to new data from the city's Department of Transportation. Most of the 30 cyclists who died in 2023 were riding electric bikes, which have proliferated on city streets in recent years. A total of 23 people died riding e-bikes, which is more than double the previous record for e-bike fatalities.

Cyclist deaths in New York City

Traditional bicycles E-bikes



Source: New York City Department of Transportation • By The New York Times

Serious injuries among cyclists went up last year as well, according to preliminary data compiled by the Department of Transportation. A total of 395 cyclists were severely injured, including 79 who were riding e-bikes. That's about 50 more serious injuries than the previous year.

Despite this uptick, the rate of cyclist fatalities and serious injuries as a share of all bike trips has been trending downward for many years, suggesting that riding a bicycle in New York City has become safer over the long term. As of 2022, the rate of deaths and severe injuries was about 16 per 10 million bike rides, according to the preliminary data — down from about 34 per 10 million rides a decade earlier.

Historically, most people who have died riding bicycles in New York City were killed in collisions with cars and trucks on streets that did not have bike lanes, and that was the case last year as well. According to a New York Times analysis of preliminary police reports about the 30 deaths, most of the cyclists who died in 2023 collided with automobiles in areas without bike infrastructure, regardless of the type of bike they were riding.

The rise in electric bike deaths does not appear to be the result of an increase in e-bike ridership, at least not entirely, according to the Department of Transportation. And although the most visible e-bike users in New York may be delivery workers and Citi Bike riders, the majority of people who died on e-bikes last year were neither. Only one delivery worker died from an e-bike crash, according to the department, and four people died using electric Citi Bikes, according to Lyft, which owns the bike share program.

There was one factor that contributed to last year's spike in e-bike deaths that may suggest a shifting dynamic on the road: nearly a third of the e-bike riders who died crashed or fell without any apparent interference from a vehicle or pedestrian.

How New York City cyclists died in 2023

23 e-bike riders

11 were in collisions with trucks.

4 were in collisions with cars.

7 crashed or fell without colliding with another vehicle or pedestrian.

This included the only delivery worker who died on a bike in 2023.

1 was uncategorized.

7 traditional bike riders

4 were in collisions with trucks.

2 were in collisions with cars.

1 collided with a pedestrian.

Source: New York City Department of Transportation • By The New York Times

Solo bike accidents are not a new phenomenon, but the seven e-bike riders who died this way last year represent a significant increase over previous years, said Vincent Barone, the press secretary for the Department of Transportation.

The department does not know what is behind this spate of fatal solo accidents, but is looking for ways to improve safety and keep pace with the rapid changes e-bikes have brought to the city's streets, Mr. Barone said.

“We have been updating our street designs with creative new solutions, such as wider bike lanes that better accommodate traditional and electric bikes, as well as our educational outreach and enforcement approaches to better reflect the swift and dramatic changes in technology,” he added.

The speed of e-bikes could be a factor, as could rider inexperience, said Sara Lind, an executive director at Open Plans, a group that advocates “livable streets.”

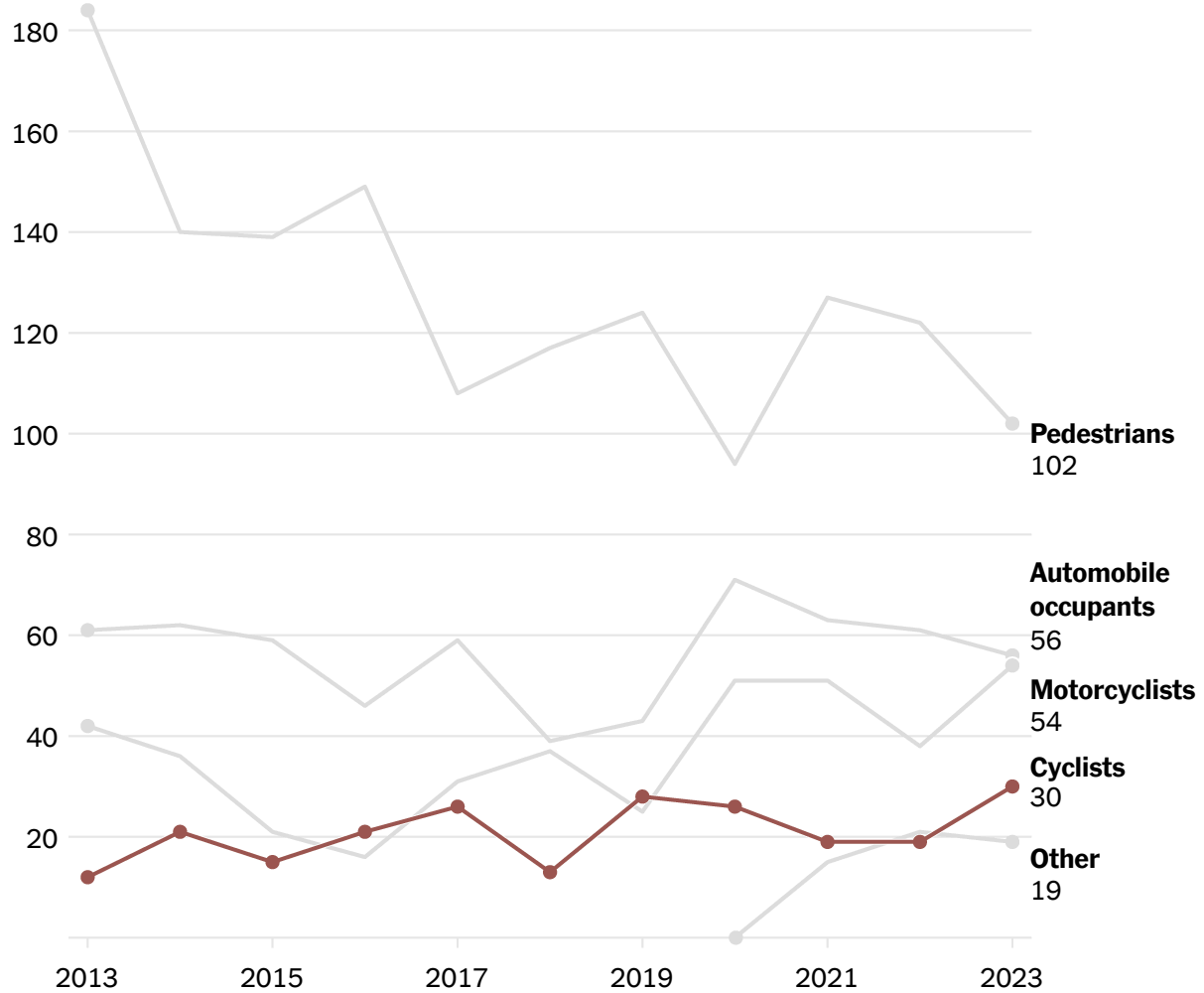
“There may be a learning curve that some first-time e-bike riders aren’t prepared for,” Ms. Lind said. “It’s very possible that that learning curve, combined with the speed of the bike, exacerbates already confusing or chaotic conditions. Navigating a pothole or a suddenly blocked bike lane is more dangerous at a higher speed, emphasizing even more the need for better infrastructure as more people use e-bikes.”

Last November, the Department of Transportation and Lyft announced a plan to reduce the top speed of electric Citi Bikes to 18 miles per hour, down from 20. E-bikes, under the city’s classification, are any battery-powered bicycles that have pedals and a speed of 25 miles per hour or less.

While the fatal solo e-bike accidents may signal new risks on the road, most of the cyclist deaths last year reflected longstanding issues that the city has struggled with: collisions with automobiles on roads without bike infrastructure.

Most of the people who died in traffic last year were either in accidents with automobiles or were riding in one. Of the 102 pedestrians who died in traffic, only two died in collisions with e-bikes, according to the Department of Transportation; the rest were hit by cars and trucks.

Traffic deaths in New York City



Source: New York City Department of Transportation • By The New York Times

Among the cyclists who died in a collision with an automobile, most were hit by trucks, like S.U.V.s, pickups, larger box trucks or tractor-trailers. Overall, trucks were involved in half of last year’s 30 bike deaths. In at least six of those 15 incidents, the cyclist was killed by a truck that was turning at an intersection — usually making a right turn.

In one crash, which took place at about 11:30 a.m. on May 1, Adam Uster, 39, was riding a traditional bicycle, heading south in a bike lane on Franklin Avenue in Brooklyn, when he was hit by a flatbed truck as the truck turned right at an intersection.



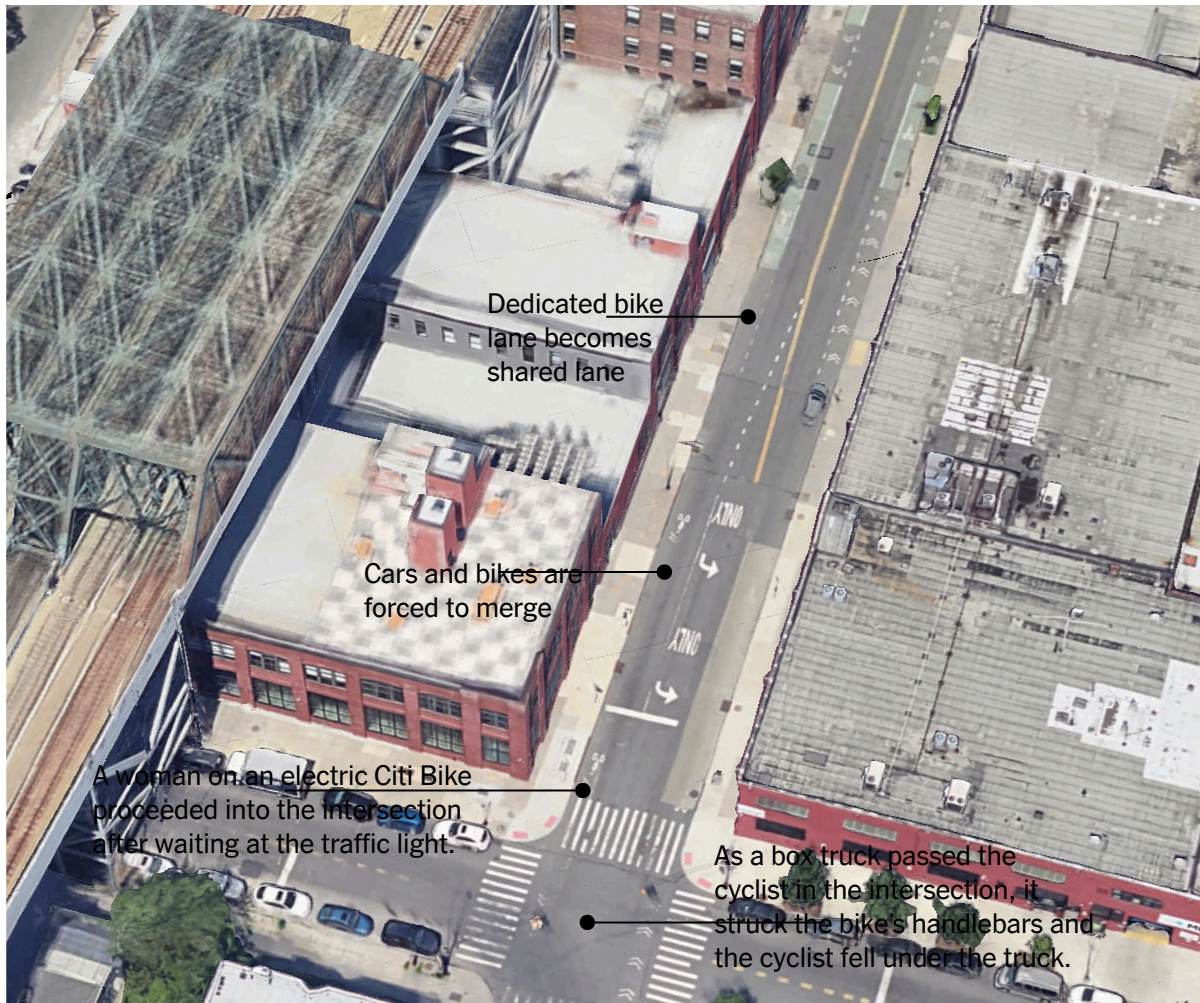
Source: Preliminary police reports. Aerial image by Google Earth. • By The New York Times

Because they sit high up and have more blind spots, truck drivers often cannot see cyclists, who can get trapped between the trucks and curbs or parked cars, Mr. Barone said. The city's bike lane designers have been working to address this issue, he said, with fixtures at intersections that force drivers to turn more slowly, rubber speed bumps and other measures.

Mr. Uster was one of the few cyclists who was riding in a bike lane when he was killed last year. More than two-thirds of the cyclists who died in traffic in 2023 were on roads that did not have bike lanes, according to the Department of Transportation, and at least two cyclists were on roads with "sharrows," which are road markings indicating that cars and bicycles must share a lane. Critics say these markers are not enough to protect cyclists.

"Paint is not protection," Ms. Lind said. "Physically protected bike lanes are what actually keep cyclists safe."

Sarah Schick, 37, was killed last year while riding on a road with sharrows. Ms. Schick was riding an electric Citi Bike on Ninth Street in Brooklyn around 7 a.m. in January. She had been riding in a dedicated bike lane that had ended and become a sharrow lane. After waiting at a traffic light, Ms. Schick and a box truck both proceeded in the narrow lane; they collided, and the truck ran her over.



Source: Preliminary police reports. Aerial image by Google Earth. • By The New York Times

The city has been painting fewer sharrows in recent years, Mr. Barone said, but still uses them between segments of dedicated bike lanes.

Last year, the city added 33.2 miles of protected bike lanes, the most ever added in one year, Mr. Barone said, bringing the total to 689 miles of protected lanes.

Philip Miatkowski, the director of research and policy at Transportation Alternatives, a cyclist and pedestrian advocacy group, said that only about 3 percent of the city's streets have bike lanes, and that the network is too

disconnected.

“Oftentimes, there isn’t a protected bike lane that leads all the way up to your doorstep, so you’re going to have to go off the protected bike path,” Mr. Miatkowski said. “I think cyclists will, in the overwhelming number of instances, take the opportunities to take a protected bike lane if it is on their way, and safer, and not locked down or doesn’t have any obstructions.”

A correction was made on March 5, 2024: An earlier version of this article misidentified the name of the street in Brooklyn where Adam Uster was riding his bike when he was killed. It was Franklin Avenue, not Franklin Street.

When we learn of a mistake, we acknowledge it with a correction. If you spot an error, please let us know at nytnews@nytimes.com. [Learn more](#)

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