

California **does have official reporting of traffic fatalities**, but the system is **not perfectly accurate or complete**. It relies on several databases and reporting steps, and each has limitations. Understanding this is important for advocacy, policy, and legislation.

Below is a clear breakdown of **how fatalities are reported and where accuracy problems occur**.

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## 1. The main official system: SWITRS

The primary statewide database is the **Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System (SWITRS)**, managed by the **California Highway Patrol**.

- Police officers complete a **traffic collision report** at the crash scene.
- That report is submitted to SWITRS.
- SWITRS aggregates the data for statewide statistics and research.

This dataset feeds other tools such as the **Transportation Injury Mapping System (TIMS)** from **UC Berkeley SafeTREC**, which lets the public analyze crash and fatality data.

Example official numbers:

- **4,061 traffic deaths in California in 2023** (down from 4,539 in 2022).
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## 2. Federal verification system

Another major dataset is the **Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS)** run by **National Highway Traffic Safety Administration**.

FARS:

- Independently compiles fatal crash data from states.
- Cross-checks police reports, death certificates, and other records.

California fatality statistics are often **compared between SWITRS and FARS** to verify trends.

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### 3. Why the numbers are not fully accurate

Even though these systems are official, experts acknowledge several **data gaps and reporting limitations**.

#### A. Fatalities may be recorded later

A crash may initially be classified as **injury**, but if the victim dies days or weeks later, the update may not always be reflected in the crash database.

This can cause **underreporting in early statistics**.

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#### B. Police report dependency

SWITRS relies on law-enforcement crash reports.

If:

- no officer investigates the crash
- or the report is incomplete

the fatality or contributing factors may be **missing or misclassified**.

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#### C. Delays in final numbers

Final statewide crash statistics can take **1–2 years to finalize** because multiple agencies must reconcile the data.

For example, **2023 fatality data was finalized in 2025**.

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#### D. Contributing factors often missing

Data fields like:

- phone use
- drug impairment
- reckless behavior
- vehicle condition

are frequently **unknown or not tested**, especially when drivers are released before full investigation.

This means the **cause of fatal crashes is often under-documented**, even if the death itself is recorded.

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## E. Inconsistent toxicology testing

For example, drug involvement is only known when testing occurs. In one study of drivers killed in crashes, **about 50% tested positive for drugs when tested** — but not all drivers are tested.

So impairment statistics may be **significantly underestimated**.

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# 4. A newer system is replacing SWITRS

California is transitioning to the **California Crash Reporting System (CCRS)**, intended to improve:

- electronic reporting by police
- data completeness
- faster updates

This transition began around **2025**.

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# 5. The key takeaway

California does report traffic fatalities, but the system has known weaknesses:

## What is reliable

- Total deaths on roadways
- Long-term trends

## What is often incomplete

- exact causes
- impairment

- reckless driving factors
  - phone use
  - vehicle condition
  - timely reporting
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