Deaths on U.S. highways are a “national epidemic,” according to the nation’s transportation chief, who urged Americans to consider seat belt use a preventive medicine.

According to statistics released in late April, 42,800 people died on the nation’s highways in 2004, up from 42,643 the year before. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration released the numbers in a preliminary road safety report.

“We are in the midst of a national epidemic,” said Transportation Secretary Norman Y. Mineta. “If this many people were to die from any one disease in a single year, Americans would demand a vaccine. The irony is we already have the best vaccine available to reduce the death toll on our highways — safety belts.”

The NHTSA report predicts the seventh straight yearly increase in motorcycle deaths, with almost 4,000 such fatalities in 2004, up 7.3 percent from 2003. Policy-makers recently took up the issue of motorcycle injury on Capitol Hill, but unfortunately an amendment introduced in the Senate in May that would have increased helmet use died (for more, see Page 34). Overall, traffic crashes cost society an estimated $230.6 billion a year, Mineta said, or $820 a person.

“Sadly, traffic crashes come at an enormous cost to society,” said Jeffrey Runge, MD, National Highway Traffic and Safety Administration administrator. “While seat belt use, at 80 percent, is at an all-time high, we could save thousands more lives each year if everyone buckled up.”

Public health advocates are key to helping reverse the trend of increasing traffic-related deaths, said Larry Cohen, MSW, who chairs APHA’s Injury Control and Emergency Health Services Section.

“I think what’s going on is that people are forgetting that traffic crashes are preventable,” said Cohen, executive director of the Oakland, Calif.-based Prevention Institute. “Public health has a critical role to play in building community support for traffic safety measures.”

Without the support of the public health community, traffic safety rests solely in the hands of law enforcement, Cohen told The Nation’s Health, and the job is simply too large for one entity to handle. He said the community investment in traffic safety has been “slowly slipping away” over the past few years, resulting in fewer resources devoted to the issue and the erosion of laws such as mandatory motorcycle helmet use. Three important elements of traffic safety that continue to be overlooked, Cohen said, are bicycle, pedestrian and work place safety.

“Public health, I think, a decade ago led the drumbeat for injuries not being accidents and for community safety being an achievable health goal,” Cohen said. “Public health needs to be re-focused and further resourced to once again fulfill that role.”

According to the national transportation report, 56 percent of occupants killed in passenger vehicles were not wearing safety belts. Passenger car occupant fatalities dropped by 2.4 percent and pick-up truck deaths fell 2 percent, while sport utility vehicle deaths rose almost 5 percent. Also, pedestrian deaths declined by about 3 percent from 4,749 to 4,598.

The report also estimated the number of registered vehicles increased from 230.8 million in 2003 to 235.4 million in 2004. The number of fatal crashes involving young drivers ages 16–20 increased slightly from 7,353 in 2003 to 7,405 last year.

NHTSA collects crash statistics annually from 50 states and the District of Columbia to produce its yearly report on traffic fatality trends. The final 2004 report is scheduled to come out this month. More information is online at www.nhtsa.dot.gov.

- Donya C. Arias