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State's highways contribute to fatalities, report claims

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Widening of the Loop 101 Price Freeway is expected to be completed soon, but some of the state's longer term projects are jeopardized by the state of Arizona's finances, which have been battered by declines in revenue from sales and gas taxes.

Arizona Department of Transportation

Arizona's interstate highways are in generally good shape but experienced the highest rate of fatalities in the nation in 2018, according to a national report released last week.

The report by The Road Information Program said that Arizona recorded 1.09 highway deaths per 100 million vehicle miles traveled on the state's interstate highways in 2018, almost twice the national average of 0.58 deaths that year.

Authors of the TRIP report – titled “Restoring the Interstate Highway System” – called for more funding to rebuild and modernize the nation's 64-year-old interstate system, claiming that deteriorating roads pose a threat to commerce and to safety.

“Deteriorating conditions and fatality rate are because of poor funding,” said Carolyn Bonifas Kelly, director of communications and research at TRIP.

But public and private officials in Arizona said it's not the roads that are the issue, it's driver behaviors.

“The problem is many acknowledge that it's wrong and dangerous and they do it anyway,” said Aldo Vazquez, a spokesman for AAA Arizona. “People need to be aware of the consequences of dangerous driving and change course to prevent tragedy.”

Research from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety showed that drivers who have been in at least one crash in the past two years are significantly more likely to engage in risky behaviors like speeding or texting, even when they think the police may catch them.

The Arizona Department of Transportation pointed to its 2019 Arizona Motor Vehicle Crash Facts report, released two weeks ago – which showed traffic fatalities on all Arizona roads reached a three-year low in 2019.

In a statement, ADOT also singled out risky behaviors in many of those crashes.

“From 2015 to 2019, 642 people were killed in crashes on interstates in Arizona. At least 43 percent of those killed were in crashes where speeding was a factor; at least 36 percent were killed in crashes where impairment was a factor and at least 41 percent of those killed weren't wearing a safety device (seat belt or a child safety seat),” according to ADOT.

“These are preventable deaths and everyone needs to make better decisions behind the wheel,” the statement said.

Kelly did not comment on Arizona specifically, but pointed to National Highway Traffic Safety Administration research that shows the roadways themselves contribute to one-third of all crashes nationwide.

The TRIP report said interstate highways are among the safest roads in the nation, and estimated that as many as 113 lives may have been saved in Arizona in 2018 because of safety features built into the interstates. But Rocky Moretti, TRIP's director of policy and research, said states still need to continue to make road safety improvements to the roads.

“We have an aging interstate system, routine repairs are not adequate,” Moretti said.

That may not be easy: Moretti pointed to significant reduction in transportation revenue because of COVID-19, with TRIP estimating that \$50 billion in highway funds will be lost nationwide over the next 18 months.

ADOT officials have expressed concern about its own five-year plan for highway improvements and new construction in meetings the past few months of the State Transportation Board.

They have called attention to state projections of a decline in hundreds of thousands of dollars in sales tax revenue this year as a result of business shutdowns and concern for the impact of unemployment on state income tax revenue over the next few years.

The TRIP report said that travel on Arizona's interstates grew 15 percent from 2000 to 2018 and that 12 percent of interstate travel in Arizona is by combination trucks.

That makes keeping interstates up to par all the more important, with the introduction this month of the U.S.-Mexico-Canada trade agreement, said Arizona Chamber of Commerce President Glenn Hamer.

“The Arizona Chamber of Commerce & Industry believes that U.S. highway infrastructure must be modernized to support freight mobility and what we anticipate will be increased cargo volumes, especially in border states like ours,” Hamer said in a statement with the report.