

Return trip: Study shows drivers hitting the roads again as pandemic eases

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PITTSBURGH — Road traffic bottomed out 15 months ago as a result of stay-at-home orders at the start of the pandemic. Empty roads meant fewer people were out spending money or going to work, driving a huge hole in the transportation budgets built in many states on gasoline tax revenue.

Now, those roads are beginning to fill up again, although not necessarily at the same times as before. With pandemic restrictions easing, that signals Americans appear to be moving toward whatever the new version of normal will be.

A national study released late in May by TRIP, a nonprofit transportation research agency, found that 15 states already had returned to or passed prepandemic traffic levels by March, and overall traffic across the country had recovered to be only 3% below March 2019 levels.

The TRIP study said the pandemic had a “profound” effect on road traffic initially with miles driven falling by 40% nationally in April 2020 compared with the previous year. That has slowly rebounded since then, dropping to 9% lower by October and 7% by March.

Nationally, Montana has had the strongest traffic surge with vehicle miles traveled increasing by 13.3% compared with March 2019. The agency also is seeing a different traffic pattern than before the pandemic with morning rush hours nationally being less crowded, midday traffic higher than before the pandemic and evening rush hours back to normal.

Traffic in Pennsylvania reached its lowest point in April 2020, when it dropped by 47% below the previous year, and it remained at 7% below March 2019.

Statewide, weekday rush-hour traffic remains down 10% to 12% and midday and overnight traffic remains 4% to 6% below.

Among nearby states, Ohio saw its miles traveled drop 39% below 2019 in March 2020 and remain 3.1% below. West Virginia was 40% below in March 2020 and is still 6.4% behind.