

## Arkansas seeing increase in traffic fatalities

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According to the National Transportation Research Group, Arkansas had a 40% increase in traffic deaths between 2019 and 2020 but says the numbers are still up.

A new report released Thursday by national transportation research nonprofit 'TRIP,' Arkansas is among the top four states with the highest spike of traffic deaths between 2019 and 2021.

According to the report, Arkansas saw a 37% increase in traffic deaths during those three years, despite fewer people traveling due to the pandemic. However, ARDOT says its reporting is a big factor in this.

"The report is quite alarming," said TRIP Director of Policy and Research Rocky Moretti. "We were really looking at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on traffic safety."

In 2019, the report shows a total of 500 Arkansas traffic fatalities. While in 2021, that number jumped to nearly 700.

"Obviously, when you see a spike in crash numbers like this, it's concerning," said Arkansas Department of Transportation Deputy Public Information Officer, Ellen Coulter.

Coulter says there are two reasons for the increase.

"Agencies were not turning in all their crash reports," Coulter said.

In 2020, ARDOT says that changed and the increase in deaths reflects that.

"However, that doesn't change our priority on safety," Coulter said.

ARDOT says a worker shortage is also placing the department in a bind.

TRIP says an increase in enforcement, lighting, signage, turning and bike lanes should help curb the problem. Safer driving could also stop the increase in traffic deaths. However, TRIP research shows that isn't happening.

ARDOT was asked if Arkansas' increased speed limit on interstates is a possible factor for the increase in deaths. ARDOT says no, it does studies to see if drivers are ready for an increase in speed limits.