

SATURDAY, JULY 3, 2022

Louisiana highway traffic deaths up in 2021; one third of victims wore no seat belt

Total exceeds even pre-pandemic year of 2019

By [JAMES WILKINS](#) | Staff writer



Emergency response vehicles are parked near a car, at left, that plunged off the elevated Interstate 10 near the Superdome, killing the driver, on June 8, 2020.

[STAFF PHOTO BY SOPHIA GERMER](#)

By James Wilkins

Almost 1,000 people died on Louisiana highways in 2021, considerably more than in the first pandemic year of 2020 and even more than in 2019.

"We know what the trend we're seeing is," said Mark Lambert, spokesperson for the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission. "Right now it's looking like, in 2021, we're showing about a little more than a 15 percent increase over 2020."

TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit, said Wednesday that Louisiana's totals were:

- **2019** - 727
- **2020** - 828
- **2021** - 976.

Lambert said he thinks the COVID-19 pandemic contributed heavily to the increase.

"In 2020 there was less traffic on the road, but there were more instances of speeding because there was less traffic being on the road," he said. "There were also more instances of people driving without their seat belts, and so when you start combining those items of people not wearing those while people are speeding and driving recklessly, that is a deadly combination."

TRIP said the number of vehicle miles traveled in Louisiana decreased in 2020 then rose in 2021 above pre-pandemic levels:

- **2019** - 51.4 billion
- **2020** - 48.4 billion
- **2021** - 52.3 billion.

Louisiana is not the only state that has seen an uptick in people killed on its highways. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration said in May that almost 43,000 people were killed on U.S. roads in 2021 - the most in 16 years.

The federal agency said an average of 118 people died in U.S highway crashes every day in 2021, and that 44 states logged increases from 2020.

Seat belts a factor

About one third of the people killed on Louisiana highways in 2021 were not wearing a seat belt, according to the state Department of Transportation and Development. Lambert said seat belts are a "boring but necessary" part of getting driving or riding in a vehicle.

"You can kind of extrapolate statewide surveys for the last few years because they've consistently shown that about 89 percent to 90 percent of people in Louisiana wear their seat belt," he said. "So if you figure that only 10 percent of people on the road, both drivers and passengers, are not wearing their seat belt and more than one third of the people who were killed weren't wearing a seat belt, that tells you that seat belts save lives."

In Louisiana, Lambert said that the number of people who report wearing seat belts has increased over previous years. He pointed to a [2019 child safety seat law](#) described as a "model for the rest of the country" to illustrate how state highway safety has improved.

"We really are making strides, but really when you look at it terms of what causes fatalities, it's almost always human behavior," he said. "It's impaired driving, it's eating, it's recklessness and not wearing your seat belt or just being distracted. We're trying really hard to change people's behaviors to save their lives."