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Rashes of Crashes

FRONT PAGE

Pandemic brought spike in fatal crashes, even with fewer cars on road

Eric Conklin | July 6, 2022



Traffic moves along the Black Horse Pike near Atlantic City on Friday.

MATTHEW STRABUK, FOR THE PRESS

New Jersey roads, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, have become increasingly deadly despite fewer cars venturing the state's roads. But it's not just the Garden State.

Since the pandemic began, American roads have seen more fatalities, even while there's been mostly less traffic activity, according to a newly publicized report.

The data comes as many Americans resume pre-pandemic travel behaviors, especially in summer, when more Americans are predicted to return to the road for vacations and other types of trips.

AAA predicted nearly 47.9 million Americans would travel 50 miles or more from their homes for Independence Day weekend, a 3.7% increase over 2021. However, travel volumes were expected to be shy of 2019 levels.

Egg Harbor Township police Capt. Fred Spano said the trend is likely caused by police policy changes throughout the pandemic.

Many departments, like Egg Harbor Township's, instructed their officers to limit

contact with the public, a means of social distancing intended to help slow the coronavirus' spread. Drivers likely found it enticing to take risks behind the wheel because they'd be less likely to receive a citation, Spano said.

"They haven't been enforcing traffic laws, and it kind of rolled over even as the pandemic lifted," Spano said.

The new data published by the TRIP, A National Transportation Research Nonprofit examines alarming traffic fatality trends throughout the nation since 2020, a year in which vehicular travel plummeted due to the pandemic's restrictions. New Jersey's numbers reflected the national trend, with a 27% increase in fatal car accidents from 2019-21. The state's fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled rose even higher, with a 36% increase.

Within the past few weeks, Egg Harbor Township police have responded to at least three fatal accidents, Spano said.

Spano also reported "a huge drop" in traffic tickets being issued from 2019 to 2021, adding the department is striving to return law enforcement to where it was pre-pandemic. But even efforts to do so may be coming too late, he said.



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Heat on Philly mayor for comments after shooting

ANNA ODD, THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
PHILADELPHIA — An escaped Mayor Jim Kenney said early Tuesday morning after two police officers were shot that he is so worried about safety at public events that he will "be happy" when he is no longer mayor, prompting national attention and calls for his resignation. Standing alongside police near outside Thomas Jefferson University Hospital, Kenney made the comments just after midnight, about two hours after gunfire rang out and chaos ensued during the city's annual Independence Day celebration on the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. "There's not an event or a day where I don't lay on my back at night, looking at the ceiling and worry about stuff," he said. "So everything we have in the city over the last seven years, I worry about. I don't enjoy Fourth of July. I didn't enjoy the (2019) Democratic National Convention, I didn't enjoy the NFL Draft. I'm waiting for something bad to happen all the time." "So I'll be happy when I'm not here — when I'm not mayor, and I can enjoy some stuff."

Rashes of crashes

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MATTHEW STRABUK, FOR THE PRESS

PHOTO BY CRASHES, PAGE A3

County settles contracts Atlantic City workers in two unions will receive 4% to 5% raises in newly approved contracts. LOCAL A3

Bills in limbo Legislators leave for summer break with plenty of measures un-voted upon. NEW JERSEY A4

July 4 shooting The gunman who attacked a parade in Illinois evaded initial capture by dressing as a woman. NATIONAL WORLD, A8

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Governor signs gun legislation package

NEWS CATALINI Associated Press
MEXICO — Gov. Phil Murphy on Tuesday signed seven new bills into law aimed at curtailing gun violence, including legislation to allow the state attorney general to pursue lawsuits against the firearms industry. Murphy, a second-term Democrat who's already signed a number of measures focused on gun violence, invoked the fatal Independence Day shooting in Illinois, as well as recent fatal shootings in Buffalo, New York, and Uvalde, Texas. "In the wake of horrific mass shootings in Highland Park, Illinois, Uvalde Texas, and Buffalo, New York, it is necessary that we take action in order to protect our communities," Murphy said. "Preventing what could be more legislation to come, he said there's more work to be done, particularly on how New Jersey will address the Supreme Court striking down its "undue burden" requirement to carry a handgun. Murphy said after signing the new laws that in response to the court's expansion of gun rights, he wants to see the Democratic-led Legislature address where handguns can and cannot be carried, as well as expanding the list of people prohibited from carrying. "This is a huge step forward for commonsense gun safety and for safer communities. But it cannot

PHOTO BY GUNS, PAGE A3

coronavirus' spread, U.S. vehicular travel was 40% lower than in April 2019. By October, travel rebounded quickly, coming within 9% of October 2019 levels, according to the report.

While the number of cars on the road dropped, fatal traffic accidents rose by 8%, from about 36,000 to 38,900. The traffic fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled increased by 21%, from 1.11 to 1.34, the report said.

That trend, according to the report, unfortunately, grew worse.

Last year, when most COVID-related restrictions continued to ease, vehicle travel increased significantly to about 3.2 trillion miles, a 10% increase over 2020 and 3% lower than 2019's figures, according to the report. But from 2020 to 2021, traffic fatalities increased again, this time by 11% (from 38,824 to 42,915), roughly on pace with the 10% increase in vehicle travel during the same time and the highest number recorded since 2005.

The traffic fatality rate in 2021 rose to 1.35 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, according to the report.

One poll found that daredevil-ish behavior might factor into the trend.

"It is possible that many of the individuals who were willing to travel — and even increase their travel — despite the health risks associated with the pandemic were already more willing than average to take other risks," a report from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety said.

In February, the foundation surveyed motorists on their driving habits. Motorists who maintained or increased their pre-COVID travel levels indicated they were more willing to perform risky driving behavior, including speeding, not wearing a seat belt, being impaired and driving aggressively, the foundation said.

Spano said the rules of the road are starting to be enforced more midway through 2022, all while calls for action are made by the federal government.

The U.S. Department of Transportation this year developed its "National Roadway Safety Strategy," in which the department takes aim at several suspected contributors to the increase in roadway fatalities. It includes promoting safe driving and improved infrastructure to help reduce fatal crashes.

"AAA urges state, local and tribal leaders to fully leverage the programs within the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act to implement the Safe System Approach when developing their transportation programs," said Jake Nelson, AAA's director of traffic safety advocacy and research. "We cannot fail to act at this juncture. AAA calls on government leaders to move beyond claims that 'safety is priority number one' to real-world actions that prove it."

Local police departments have been concerned about unsafe driving, as well.

In Absecon, police Chief JR Laughlin has, on multiple occasions, notified City Council that the department is getting speeder complaints

from those in town. Signage has been posted to encourage safe driving habits, and officers are keeping an eye out, ready to enforce speed limits.

Car-on-car crashes aren't the only types of accidents on the rise.

Bicycle and pedestrian fatalities increased significantly over pre-pandemic levels. From 2019 to 2021, the number of U.S. pedestrians killed increased by 18% (from 6,205 to 7,342), and the number of bicyclists killed increased by 16% (from 846 to 985).

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