



U.S. traffic fatalities surged nearly 20 Percent since 2019, according to TRIP report

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A new report from TRIP a national transportation research non-profit, has found that even as vehicle travel rates plummeted across the country, U.S. traffic fatalities increased 19 percent between 2019 and 2021.

In its new report, *Addressing America's traffic Safety Crisis: Examining the Causes of Increasing U.S. Traffic Fatalities and Identifying Solutions to Improve Road User Safety*, TRIP found that U.S. vehicle travel was 40 percent lower in April 2020 than it was in April 2019. But, during that same time, the overall number of traffic fatalities increased 8 percent from 36,096 to 38,824, while the traffic fatality rate increased by 21 percent, from 1.11 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled to 1.34 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled.

In 2021, the report found, vehicle travel increased 10 percent over 2020 levels to 3.2 trillion miles. Travel fatalities also increased. From 2020 to 2021, traffic fatalities increased to 42,915, an 11 percent increase, rising to 1.35 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled. The report said the number of traffic fatalities was the highest recorded since 2005.

The report said the increase in fatalities is due largely to increased risks being taken by drivers. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, driving patterns and behaviors changed significantly – with more drivers engaged in behaviors like speeding, failing to wear seat belts and driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs.

Similarly, AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety came to the conclusion that increased risks are being taken by drivers. A survey by that organization of drivers found that drivers who maintained or increased their pre-COVID travel levels said they were more likely to engage in risky driving behavior including speeding, not wearing a seat belt, driving while impaired or driving aggressively.

“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,” the AAFTS report found.

The report said data from NHTSA indicates that the number of people killed in crashes involving alcohol rose by nine percent between 2019 and 2020, and by another five percent from 2020 to 2021. The number of occupants killed as a result of not wearing a seat belt rose 15 percent between 2019 and 2020, as another three percent between 2020 and 2021. The number killed in speeding-related crashes climbed 11 percent from 2019 to 2020, and five percent from 2020 to 2021.

The report said the severity of traffic crashes also increased. In 2020, the number of patients treated by EMS at vehicle crashes with severe injuries rose 21 percent over 2019. Through the first eight months of 2021, the share of patients with severe injuries was 17 percent higher than in 2019.

Industry leaders said infrastructure spending through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act would help combat the increase in fatalities.

“The dramatic increase in roadway fatalities during the pandemic spotlights a national public health crisis that states have been working to resolve for years,” said Jim Tymon, executive director of the American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials. “The Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act provides state DOTs with opportunities to expand activities in coordination with partners to double down on integrating a safe system approach and strategies throughout the IJA. In addition, the increased funding for infrastructure-related improvements and the ability to use a portion of the infrastructure safety funds for behavioral safety programs will advance a much-needed cross-cutting safety culture focused on zero traffic fatalities and injuries.”