

Traffic fatalities climb in 2021

BY CALVIN SHOMAKER | BRISTOL HERALD COURIER



This image of a Feb. 10 fatal crash was captured by a highway camera on the Virginia Department of Transportation's 511 website.

VDOT

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Traffic fatalities in Virginia were up 16% last year compared to 2019 and were up 19% across the entire country, according to a new report from TRIP, a transportation research nonprofit.

TRIP's study also found that in the United States in 2020, traffic fatalities were up 8% from 2019, despite an 11% decrease in vehicle travel.

Last year in Virginia, there were 968 traffic fatalities total and 161 people injured on average each day, according to data from the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles.

Virginia State Police 1st Sgt. M.R. Willis, area commander for the Bristol, Washington County and Scott County region, attributes much of the increase in fatalities to speed.

"Across the state, the speeds have increased quite a bit," Willis said. "We are seeing triple-digit speeds at a much more alarming rate than we have ever seen, in my opinion."

According to Virginia DMV figures for 2021, 46% of traffic fatalities were speed-related.

In Washington County last year there were eight traffic fatalities with three being related to unrestrained passengers, DMV data shows.

Distracted driving plays another major role in crashes, Willis said.

"There are so many things right now that can distract people who are driving," Willis said. "I would attribute a lot of it to cell phones. People cannot seem to put them down."

The number of cyclists and pedestrians dying in traffic accidents is also worrisome. Just last year, there were 16 bicycle riders killed in Virginia as a result of a vehicle crash, up 23% from 2019, and 125 pedestrians killed, according to Virginia DMV stats.

Pedestrian and cyclist deaths accounted for nearly a fifth of all U.S. traffic deaths a year ago, TRIP found.

A number of factors can play into such fatalities, Willis said, including driver inattention, terrain, cell phones, drugs and alcohol. Increasing awareness and education around the issue is one way to prevent tragedy, he says, but drivers being mindful and considerate on the road is imperative.

"The road is a dangerous place, I don't care where you are," Willis said. "We all have to use it together, and we have to respect one another and try to look out for each other's safety, and some are just not doing that."

Staying calm on the road and taking your time is something all drivers can do to make a difference.

"I tell people to allow plenty of time to get where you're going," Willis said. "Give yourself some time to stop and take a break when you get frustrated on the road to reduce the amount of road rage that you have going on."