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EDITOR'S PICK

Getting There: Driving in the time of COVID is a risky adventure

BY SCOTT SHENK The Free Lance-Star | July 5, 2022

A new report lays out the troubling period of post-COVID life on the nation's roads.

Despite the plunge in traffic at the height of the pandemic, deaths on U.S. roads spiked, and the trend continued in 2021, according to a report by TRIP, a nonprofit transportation research group.

TRIP reported last week that traffic fatalities surged 19% from 2019 to 2021.

In 2020, traffic on U.S. roads was 11% lower than 2019, according to the report. Fatal crashes jumped 8% in 2020, from 36,096 to 38,824. The fatality rate per 100 million miles traveled spiked by 21 percent.

Traffic picked up again last year as pandemic restrictions gradually eased, but there still weren't as many drivers compared to 2019's pre-pandemic levels. Yet, in 2021, deadly crashes jumped by 11 percent to 42,915, the most fatalities since 2005, according to the TRIP report. The fatality rate also increased.

Bicyclists and pedestrians weren't safe either, as those fatalities also spiked.

TRIP also confirmed earlier reports highlighting risky driving as the culprit, quoting the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's observation that "after the declaration of the public health emergency in March 2020, driving patterns and behaviors in the United States changed significantly. Of the drivers who remained on the roads, some engaged in riskier behavior, including speeding, failure to wear seat belts, and driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs."

TRIP pointed out that NHTSA's data "indicates the number of people killed in police-reported, alcohol-involved crashes rose by nine percent from 2019 to 2020 and by five percent from 2020 to 2021."

There was a 15% increase in deaths of occupants not wearing seat belts from 2019 to 2020 and a 3% rise from 2020 to 2021.

Speed-related fatal crashes jumped 11% from 2019 to 2020 and 5% from 2020 to 2021.

There also was a dramatic increase in injuries suffered in crashes, with a 21% surge between 2019 and 2020 and a 17% increase through the first eight months of 2021 compared to 2019.

Is anything being done?

TRIP noted that the U.S. Department of Transportation adopted the National Roadway Safety Strategy, aimed at the "nation's roadway safety crisis," something states and other local transportation agencies are embracing.

The safety strategy aims to address the issue through such tactics as education, road design and expanding vehicle technology.

It won't be easy.

The study cites a 2017 report from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety that the U.S. has a \$146 billion backlog of needed roadway safety improvements."

One potential remedy could be the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which will inject \$454 billion between 2022 and 2026.

That's a start, but in the meantime, beware. The driver next to you or behind you or in front of you could be taking more risks on the road.