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TOP STORY

2021 traffic fatalities rose in nation and Virginia, report says

Lee Enterprises Virginia News Syndicate



A roadside memorial stands near the site of a fatal crash on Virginia Route 3 in Spotsylvania County.

Fredericksburg Free Lance-Star

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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.

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.

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'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.

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.

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

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."

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.

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.

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."

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.