

## Report: Traffic Fatalities Rose 20% Since the Start of the Pandemic

*Higher rates of fatalities in traffic accidents on rural roads may be due to rural road conditions and access to emergency medical care, a national transportation research group has found.*



(Photo by Tobias Tullius on Unsplash)

by [Liz Carey](#) | August 11, 2022

In its latest [report](#), TRIP, a non-profit organization looking at economic and technical data on surface transportation issues, found that fatal traffic accidents since the onset of the pandemic have risen by nearly 20%.

The report from TRIP found that U.S. vehicle travel fell about 40% between April 2019 and April 2020, but that the overall rate of traffic fatalities increased 21% from 1.11 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled in 2019 to 1.34 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled in 2020.

In 2021, vehicle miles traveled increased to 3.2 trillion miles, but so too did the fatalities rate, rising to 1.35 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled – the highest rate recorded since 2015.

Traditionally, those rates are higher on rural roads, Rocky Moretti, TRIPs' director of policy and research, told the Daily Yonder in an interview.

Traffic fatalities on rural, non-Interstate roads occur at a rate twice that of all other roads, the organization found. In 2018, non-Interstate roads had a traffic fatality rate of 2.0 deaths for every 100 million vehicle miles traveled. And, the organization said, rural, non-Interstate routes account for 22% of all vehicle miles traveled in the U.S., but were the location of 40% of the country's traffic fatalities in 2018.

Texas ranked as the number one state for rural traffic fatalities in 2018 with 1,295, beating out the number two state, California, with 938. Rounding out the top 10 most dangerous states for rural traffic deaths were North Carolina, with 782, South Carolina with 593, Florida with 584, Pennsylvania with 479, Alabama with 480, Georgia with 470, Indiana with 470 and Kentucky with 465.

Part of the reason may be the time it takes for first responders to reach a crash, Moretti said. Citing information from the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#), Moretti said there was a correlation between the length of time it takes for emergency personnel to respond to a scene and death rates.

For instance, comparing motor vehicle accident ejection rates from 2019 to 2020, the NHTSA found that while ejection rates increased in both urban and rural areas, "ejections increased more in rural areas, particularly among males."

The NHTSA said because EMS response times in rural counties are longer, and longer response times negatively correlate with patient outcomes, the sustained increase in ejections rates is "concerning."

One of the many causes of the ejections, the NHTSA said, was failure to wear a seat belt. Those kinds of risky behaviors contribute to higher traffic fatalities, TRIP said.

NHTSA found that driving patterns and behaviors, such as speeding, failing to wear a seat belt and driving under the influence of drugs and alcohol, changed significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic.

In rural traffic fatalities, seat belt safety and impaired driving may be a factor, but many are head-on crashes that are the result of a motorist making an unintentional maneuver because of driver fatigue, being distracted or driving too fast in a curve, the group said.

But the roads themselves may also be at fault at times.

TRIP found that higher traffic fatality rates on non-Interstate routes could result from a lack of roadway safety features to higher speeds on rural roads compared to urban roads.

"Rural roads are more likely than urban roads to have roadway features that reduce safety, including narrow lanes, limited shoulders, sharp curves, exposed hazards, pavement drop-offs, steep slopes and limited clear zones along roadsides," TRIP found.

And because those rural routes are often constructed over a period of years, they are more likely to have inconsistent design features for things like lane widths, curves, shoulders and clearance zones along roadsides. The organization found that 23% of rural roads have lane widths of 10 feet or less, below the desirable lane width of at least 11 feet.

Rural roads are also more likely to be two-lanes. TRIP said that 86% of rural America's roads are two-lanes compared to just 56% of urban non-freeway routes.

Moretti said that while rural traffic death rates are typically higher than urban rates, the group didn't see significant increases in the rural/urban divide during the pandemic.

"While overall U.S traffic fatalities increased by 8% from 2019 to 2020, rural traffic fatalities increased by only 1%," he said, indicating that urban traffic fatalities increased faster than rural traffic fatalities from 2019 to 2020.