

T^{SHELBYVILLE} TIMES-GAZETTE

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Tennessee traffic fatalities increased 17% from 2019 to 2022

Washington, D.C. – The number and rate of U.S. traffic fatalities surged in 2020 and 2021 and decreased slightly in 2022 from the previous year, but remained at a high level as vehicle travel returned to near pre-pandemic levels.

This is according to a report released today by [TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit](#), entitled [Addressing America's Traffic Safety Crisis: Examining the Causes of Increasing U.S. Traffic Fatalities and Identifying Solutions to Improve Road User Safety](#). The report documents the increase in the number and rate of traffic fatalities from 2019 to 2022 at the national and state levels, examines causes for this increase, calculates the cost of fatal and serious traffic crashes, and prescribes a broad, comprehensive approach to reducing traffic fatalities in the U.S.

In April 2020, as most activity was curtailed in an effort to slow the spread of COVID-19, U.S. vehicle miles of travel (VMT) was 40 percent lower than April 2019. By the end of 2020, overall U.S. VMT was 11 percent lower than in 2019. Vehicle travel rebounded to four percent below pre-pandemic levels in 2021, and in 2022 rose to one percent below 2019's pre-pandemic levels.

However, from 2019 to 2022, while vehicle travel decreased and then began to rebound, the number of traffic fatalities and the rate of traffic fatalities per 100 million VMT soared and has remained significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels. The number of U.S. traffic fatalities increased 19 percent from 2019 to 2022, from 36,096 to 42,795, and the nation's fatality rate per 100 million VMT increased 22 percent during that time, from 1.11 to 1.35.

In Tennessee, from 2019 to 2022, the number of traffic fatalities increased 17 percent and the fatality rate per 100 million VMT increased 19 percent, while vehicle travel remained the same. Data for all states can be found in the [Appendix](#).

Bicyclist and pedestrian fatalities, which accounted for 20 percent of all U.S. traffic fatalities in 2022, increased 19 percent from 2019 to 2022. From 2019 to 2022, the number of pedestrians killed increased 18 percent (from 6,205 to 7,345) and the number of bicyclists killed increased 26 percent (from 846 to 1,068).

U.S. motorcyclist fatalities increased by 20 percent from 2019 to 2022, from 5,015 to 6,000. This coincides with the rise in the share of motorcyclists who reported not wearing helmets, which increased from 17 percent to 29 percent from 2019 to 2021. While motorcycle travel accounted for 0.6 percent of annual VMT in 2021, motorcyclists represented 14 percent of traffic fatalities.

Traffic result in a significant economic burden. According to a 2023 National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) report, the tangible economic costs of traffic crashes include medical care, lost productivity, legal and court costs, insurance administrative costs, workplace costs, congestion impacts (travel delay, excess fuel consumption and pollution), emergency services, and property damage. NHTSA has also estimated the annual value of the lost quality-of-life cost of traffic crashes causing serious injury or death. The lost quality-of-life costs include the loss of remaining lifespan, extended or lifelong physical impairment, or physical pain.

Based on NHTSA's traffic crash cost methodology, TRIP estimates that fatal and serious traffic crashes in Tennessee in 2022 caused a total of \$55 billion in the value of societal harm, which includes \$14 billion in economic costs and \$41 billion in quality-of-life costs.

"Saving lives on our nation's roadways requires teamwork – from the drivers who travel our roads to the governments that fund road work to the manufacturers, contractors and innovators involved. We must all commit to doing our part to reduce the loss of life and serious injuries on American roadways that cost an estimated \$1.9 trillion last year and inflicted never-ending pain on families," said American Traffic Safety Services Association (ATSSA) Board of Directors Chairman Jeff Johnson. "For our part, at ATSSA, we will not rest until we achieve the goal of zero deaths on U.S. roadways."

The significant increase in traffic fatalities since the onset of the pandemic appears largely related to increased risks being taken by drivers. In an [October 2021 report](#), the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration found 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."

The AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (AAAFTS) drew similar conclusions about the role of increased risks being taken by drivers during the pandemic. A survey taken of drivers in October and November 2020 by the AAAFTS asked whether their level of driving had decreased, remained the same or increased since the beginning of COVID-19 related restrictions, and whether the motorist had engaged in a variety of risky driving behaviors in the previous 30 days. In a February 2022 [brief](#) about the survey, the AAAFTS noted that drivers who maintained or increased their pre-COVID travel levels indicated that they were more likely to engage in risky driving behavior, including speeding, not wearing a seat belt, being impaired and 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 AAAFTS report found.

Data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) indicates the number of people killed in police-reported alcohol involved crashes increased 22 percent from 2019 to 2022. The number of passenger vehicle occupants not wearing seatbelts who were killed increased 20 percent from 2019 to 2022. The share of adult front-seat passengers wearing seat belts reached 92 (91.6) percent in 2022, an increase from 91 (90.7) percent in 2019. NHTSA data also found that the number of people killed in speeding-related traffic crashes climbed 23 percent from 2019 to 2022, and represented 27 percent of U.S. traffic fatalities in 2022. From 2019 to 2021, the number of fatalities in distraction affected traffic crashes increased by 13 percent, from 3,119 to 3,522. From 2019 to 2021, traffic fatalities in U.S. highway work zones increased by 13 percent, from 845 to 956.