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It's Worth Knowing What's Really Going On.

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Gridlock Guy: The void and rising road fatalities because of it



Caption Credit: JOHN SPINK / AJC

[Atlanta Traffic](#)

By Doug Turnbull, for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Summer has officially begun, and the height of the travel season has arrived. With kids out of school, idle hands become the devil's workshop. Older ones with keys and wheels at their disposal sometimes fill the void of time with daredevil maneuvers.

Of course, many adults are even worse about this.

Moreland Avenue in southern DeKalb County has long been notorious as a stretch where bikers and hot rodders alike go to lay drag. That part of Moreland is wide — three lanes each way — and very industrial. There are big stretches without signal interruptions to calm traffic speeds. Frankly, drag racing and burnouts are safer, so to speak, in this area than some of the other roads that selfish racers have shut down around town.

Just because this goes down on Moreland Ave. doesn't at all make it safe.

I had to cover traffic in [WSB's 24-Hour Traffic Center](#) overnight on Sunday, June 18th. Around 10:30 p.m. I heard some complaints on the DeKalb and Atlanta police scanner channels about drivers doing burnouts on Moreland Avenue at Henrico Road.

I pulled up the WSB Jam Cam at that intersection and, while I didn't see burnouts any longer being done, I did see a gathering of several dozen vehicles. These mostly late-model, American cars — the high horsepower sedans and coupes — are the prototypical muscle cars that have caused illegal stirs on the streets in recent years.

At approximately 11:30 p.m., nearly all the cars that had been lining the road and jamming the Chevron parking lot departed at the same time.

I scanned the nearby cameras on I-285 and did not see the horsepower horde enter the freeway. But just moments later, I found a widely scattered crash with multiple vehicles on I-285/westbound (Inner Loop) at Jonesboro Road (Exit 55). That is just two miles west of and only one exit over from Moreland Ave.

That crash certainly had to have involved some of the cars back on Moreland Ave. Days later, I asked APD just that. The police,

however, could not confirm if any street racing was involved in that crash, if any of the cars involved were street racing prior (on Moreland Ave. or otherwise), and they said that no arrests were made. Records indicate that this was nothing more than a multi-car crash, APD said.

While I could not prove my theory, I still stand by it. The tangentiality of the wreck to the crowd on Moreland Ave. is not the only reason. The fact that this late-night crash involved so many vehicles and was spread into nearly every lane seemed to fall in line with a bunch of cars traveling close to each other. 11:30 Sunday night traffic is normally very spread out.

Say a fast-moving pack of highly adrenalized muscle car drivers, traveling close together, runs up on slower cars or a tractor trailer. That blip in the continuum could easily cause chaos. Maybe some jostling of positions or racing caused contact and then a domino effect. But APD said they had not yet determined there to have been any racing related to this wreck.

TRIP, a national transportation research non-profit, recently found that road fatalities increased both locally and nationwide from 2019 to 2022. The firm found that the fatality rate per vehicle miles traveled increased 19% nationally and 20% in Georgia from before the pandemic to after it.

The fatality rate surged in 2020 and 2021 then decreased slightly in 2022, [the TRIP study said](#).

The wide conclusion on the reason for this trend is the void created by the early-pandemic shutdowns. When the roads became ghost towns, the demons came out to speed. Higher speeds mean harder crashes. Higher speeds also acclimate those drivers; 90 or 100 mph seems less stark after a while. Then later in the pandemic, when the roads started to fill with other cars, velocity-jaded motorists ended up slamming into slower ones. Harder crashes mean more injuries and more deaths.

Vehicles have only gotten safer each year. But fatalities have risen in Georgia, despite safer cars and the state having a stricter hands-free law in place since 2018. Part of the reason: the void. The gap in time during work or school is where hijinks can occur. The light volume on pandemic-cleansed freeways or during the sleepy late nights are inviting for engine revs and tire squeals.

But the consequences have not changed over time. Even the best, most controlled, most acclimated driver in the world can make mistakes. And skilled wheelmen also should never trust the drivers around them to drive cleanly or should never assume that hazards won't arise ahead.

Talented racers are often not the best drivers — especially when they are given a void.

Doug Turnbull, the PM drive Skycopter anchor for Triple Team Traffic on 95.5 WSB, is the Gridlock Guy. [Download the Triple Team Traffic Alerts App](#) to hear reports from the WSB Traffic Team automatically when you drive near trouble spots. Contact him at Doug.Turnbull@cmg.com.