



More people are dying in traffic crashes. Officials blame risky behavior.

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The scene of a fatal vehicle crash on Port Sheldon Street in Ottawa County's Olive Township on Friday, Jan. 24, 2020. (Cory Morse | MLive.com file photo) Cory Morse | MLive.com

By [Justin P. Hicks | jhicks3@mlive.com](mailto:jhicks3@mlive.com)

Michigan saw a rise in traffic fatalities last year despite fewer vehicles on the road.

In 2022, the state had a 15% increase in traffic deaths compared to 2019, according to a [report](#) published Wednesday, June 21, by the national transportation research nonprofit group TRIP. The state's fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled also increased 22%, as vehicle travel decreased by 4%.

Michigan's 1,133 traffic death total from last year was three deaths fewer than 2021, but 148 more than 2019, according to data published by TRIP. State officials had not yet released Michigan's 2022 crash data to the public as of Thursday, June 22.

Traffic safety experts have indicated the increase in road deaths are likely a result of people taking greater risks including speeding, impaired and distracted driving, and reduced seatbelt and motorcycle helmet use.

Rob Coppersmith, executive vice president of the Michigan Infrastructure & Transportation Association, said the latest data is alarming and indicates a need to make changes to improve road safety. His group has advocated for changes to Michigan law to reduce distracted driving and allow cameras to reduce speeding in work zones.

"(The TRIP report) validates other reports we've heard and to me, from an association standpoint, it means we need to stay the course and stay on it hard because unless some major things change, I don't see that trend reducing anytime soon," he said.

"There's no silver bullet here. It's just going to be a combination of everything and trying to influence driver behavior is a very tough thing because a lot of people, their mindset when they get behind the wheel, it's like 'How fast can I get home and everything annoys me and oh here's construction again.'"

Researchers estimated that Michigan's fatal and serious traffic crashes caused a total of \$66 billion in the "value of societal harm," including \$16 billion in economic costs and \$50 billion in quality-of-life costs. Their estimates look at things like medical care, lost productivity, legal and court costs, insurance costs, emergency services, loss of life, extended or lifelong physical impairment, and property damage.

Nationally in 2022, there were 42,795 traffic fatalities, which was an increase of 19% from 36,096 such deaths in 2019. The rise was also noted in the fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, which increased 22% during that time.

Bicycle, pedestrian and motorcycle deaths each increased by at least 18% over the last three years. In 2022, there were 7,345 pedestrians, 6,000 motorcyclists, and 1,068 bicyclists who were killed as a result of vehicle crashes.

The rise in motorcycle deaths coincided with an increase in the number of riders who reported not wearing a helmet (29%). Motorcyclists represented 14% of traffic fatalities while accounting for less than 1% of annual vehicle miles traveled in 2021.

Researchers found significant increases in traffic deaths from 2019 to 2022 that were associated with risky behaviors including:

- Alcohol-involved fatalities (increased 22%)
- Passenger vehicle occupants not wearing seatbelts (increased 20%)
- Speeding-related fatalities (increased 23%)
- Distracted driving fatalities (increased 13%)

Michigan recently passed [new legislation](#) that will make it illegal to hold or use a mobile electronic device while behind the wheel. It includes sending or receiving a phone call or text message; watching, recording or sending a video; and reading or posting on a social networking site.

The rule goes into effect June 30. Violations will be punishable first by a \$100 fine or 16 hours of community service. Subsequent violations will cost more, with fines doubling if the driver is involved in a crash.

Coppersmith from the Michigan Infrastructure & Transportation Association supports the new law, and his group is advocating for further safety enhancements. Up next is allowing cameras in construction zones.

"Cameras in work zones aren't a gotcha type of thing," he said. "It's all about changing behaviors, not about creating a revenue source ... We hope if cameras become a thing, that it's a declining revenue source, meaning everyone gets the idea that I can't speed through work zones."

"We're trying to create a safe environment for workers and motorists, because we care about crashes on both sides of the barrel."

To combat the rise in traffic deaths, the U.S. Department of Transportation adopted its National Roadway Safety Strategy. The approach includes encouraging safe and responsible driving through education, extension of safety belt law enforcement, and enhanced enforcement and penalties for speeding and impaired, aggressive or distracted driving.

The plan also seeks to improve road and vehicle safety, and encourage safer speeds with things like roundabouts, curb extensions, and improved signage. It's being used by state and local transportation agencies in an attempt to improve road safety.

"Making a commitment to eliminating fatal and serious injuries on the nation's roadways will require robust investment and coordinated activities by transportation and safety-related agencies in providing the needed layers of protection for the nation's motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists, including safe road users, safe roads, safe vehicles, safe speeds and high-quality post-crash care," said Dave Kearby, TRIP's executive director, in a prepared statement.