

Traffic fatalities jumped during pandemic, and haven't yet come back down, new study says

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An accident on I-83 North in Harrisburg on June 1, 2022 causes traffic delays. A new review of federal crash data shows accident fatality rates haven't fallen back from increases that first appeared during the pandemic. Sean Simmers | ssimmers@pennlive.com

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A new review of traffic accidents over the coronavirus pandemic years has found a curious contrast: As people drove less during the COVID-era lockdowns, the number of people getting killed in traffic accidents rose. And, through 2022, the fatality rates really haven't fallen back yet.

Pennsylvania is no exception.

According to the report by TRIP: The Road Information Program, there were 1,059 traffic fatalities in Pennsylvania in 2019, the last full year before the pandemic upended work, leisure and everyday traffic patterns.

It was also, according to Pennsylvania Department of Transportation records, the lowest single-year highway death toll in the last 20 years.

In the three years since, however, U.S. Transportation Department figures show Pennsylvania's traffic fatalities have averaged 1,183 per year, up 11.7 percent from the 2019 baseline, even though motorists - especially in 2020 - were driving less.

Based on measures of vehicle miles travelled, the jump is even higher.

In Pennsylvania, overall vehicle travel in 2022 was down by 4 percent from 2019 levels. But that meant the number of traffic-related deaths per 100 million vehicle miles travelled increased by 20 percent over the same time frame, from 1.03 to 1.24 last year.

For the nation as a whole, that fatality rate was 1.11 per million miles travelled in 2019, and rose to 1.35 in 2022.

Experts are still trying to understand the factors behind these divergent trends, but the TRIP study authors have theorized, based on driver surveys and other factors, that during the

pandemic the motoring public may have had an exaggerated share of risk-takers.

A fall 2020 survey by AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety found drivers who maintained or increased their pre-COVID travel levels were more likely to say they'd engaged in risky driving behavior within the prior month, 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 foundation's report, released in February 2022, hypothesized.



A new study shows crashes in work zones on all Pennsylvania roadways dropped 26.3 percent from 2019 to 2022, which it credits to use of automated work zone speed cameras. Natalie Kolb | Commonwealth Media Services
Commonwealth Media Services: Natalie Kolb

Safer work zones

One area of progress in Pennsylvania noted in the latest TRIP report has been in work zone safety.

According to PennDOT data, in 2022, there were 1,293 total crashes in work zones on all Pennsylvania roadways, down 26.3 percent from 1,753 in 2019, the last full year before implementation of automated speed enforcement in construction zones.

State officials and highway construction groups cite that as an unqualified success since vehicle miles travelled in Pennsylvania were down just 4 percent from the pre-pandemic baseline in 2022, and work zone crashes have been on the rise nationally.

Those kinds of results have highway safety advocates calling on the state legislature to reauthorize the work zone camera program before it is set to expire next February.

TRIP is a non-profit research organization that analyzes road safety, performance and other surface transportation issues. It is funded by a coalition of transportation groups, including labor unions and national and state highway contractor groups, that advocate for increased highway funding.