



Ohio traffic deaths up compared to 10 years ago despite recent declines

By Nick Evans, Ohio Capital Journal, ohiocapitaljournal.com

The July 4 weekend means Ohio's roads will be packed with holiday travelers. AAA projects almost 61 million will hit the road and another 10 million have other travel plans. A recent report digging through a decade of traffic fatality data offers a reminder to be patient behind the wheel.

The Roadway Information Program, or TRIP, [study](#) has some good news and some bad. The transportation research nonprofit found that in the 10 years between 2013 and 2023, traffic fatalities have jumped substantially nationwide. But zeroing in on the past three, deaths have begun to decline from their peak during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In a press release, TRIP executive director Dave Kearby argued, "While it is good news that the number of traffic fatalities is trending downward in recent years, the sharp increase in traffic fatalities over the past decade must be addressed."

[In Ohio specifically](#), the number of fatalities has increased by 26 percent over the past decade, rising from 989 in 2013 to 1,242 in 2023. Those 2023 figures are eight-percent lower than the state's peak in 2021. Applying the raw numbers to travel patterns, Ohio's fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles of travel amounts to an increase of 23 percent over the past ten years and a decline of 10 percent over the past three years.

Causes

TRIP's report is based on data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, and researchers highlighted a handful of behaviors driving traffic deaths.

Over the past five years, speeding related crashes rose by 21 percent around the U.S. and accounted for more than a quarter of traffic deaths in 2023. Between 2018 and 2022, alcohol-involved crashes rose by 29 percent, and fatalities from distracted driving increased by 16 percent. The study's authors are quick to note while cellphone use is often cited as an example of distracted driving, it's not the only culprit — eating, talking and adjusting controls can all take attention away from the road.

The study's authors note in 2023, pedestrian and bicyclist fatalities in the U.S. made up about a fifth of the total.

Motorcyclists, which account for less than 1 percent of annual travel in the country, represent 16 percent of its traffic fatalities. Motorcycle deaths have also seen a marked increase recently as the share of those riding without helmets has climbed.

All of those data points relate to national trends, but one area where researchers provided state level data is work zone fatalities. Ohio ranks 10th among states, with 106 fatalities over the past five years.

Jake Nelson, who heads up AAA's traffic safety advocacy, argued, "Despite a drop in U.S. crash fatalities, we know that

drivers continue to engage in dangerous behaviors like speeding or driving under the influence."

"The funds to improve our nation's transportation system are available, which means there is no excuse not to improve the safety of our roadways," Nelson continued. "We must also push for real change in communities where deaths are the highest and ensure that funds are directed to those areas where they are most needed."

Dollars and cents

The study also applies NHTSA's traffic cost methodology to determine how much major crashes and fatalities cost us. NHTSA splits costs into two buckets. Tangible economic costs cover expenses like medical care, property damage and emergency services. Quality of life costs have to do with longer term impacts like ongoing physical impairments, chronic pain and loss of lifespan.

At the national level, TRIP estimates 2023 crashes tallied \$460 billion in tangible economic costs, and almost 1.4 trillion more in quality-of-life costs. In Ohio, researchers put the figures at \$15.5 billion and \$47.1 billion, respectively.

Meanwhile, TRIP applauds U.S. Department of Transportation investments in safety through legislation like the 2021 Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. That measure put \$454 billion toward highway and transit improvements over a five-year period.

TRIP executive director Kearby argued, "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."

Tuesday, Gov. Mike DeWine [announced several projects](#) receiving funding through the Ohio Department of Transportation's Safe Routes to School program. In all, those infrastructure improvements will cost about \$8 million. Two of the projects also qualified for funding through a program included in the federal infrastructure bill.

"Creating the opportunity for children to walk and bike to school is so important, and this funding will help communities ensure that these routes are as safe as possible," DeWine said in a press release. "Motorists should also do their part by paying attention, especially in and around schools."

Improvements to sidewalks, crosswalk and signage in Fostoria and Akron will receive \$425,000 from the federal legislation.