

Report: Increase in Virginia traffic fatalities reflective of national trends

By Morgan Sweeney | [The Center Square](#) | July 12, 2024
(The Center Square) — Virginia’s traffic fatalities decreased last year for the first time since the pandemic and after a significant increase from 2020-2021 — but they’re still up by 24% since 2013.

These trends generally mirror national traffic trends, with traffic fatalities up 25% nationally during that same period, according to TRIP, a national transportation research nonprofit. The U.S. saw a dramatic rise in traffic fatalities in 2021 and a “modest decrease” in 2022 and 2023.

Similarly, while traffic deaths in the commonwealth increased slightly in 2020, they surged from 850 in 2020 to 973 in 2021. Virginia hasn’t seen such a significant one-year increase any year going back to at least 1986, according to [data](#) from the state Department of Motor Vehicles. The last time it came close was in 1996, when fatal traffic accidents exceeded the previous year by 112. In 2022, traffic deaths rose again by 35 and, for the sixth time since 1986, surpassed 1,000.

But in 2023, traffic fatalities declined by nearly 100, indicating that things may be heading in a better direction.

The Virginia Department of Transportation is happy with the recent downward trend in fatal accidents but is concerned by the overall increase in the last decade.

“While it is good news that traffic fatalities have decreased in the past couple of years, the increase over the past decade should alarm all of us,” said Jessica Cowardin, a representative of VDOT, in an email to The Center Square.

However, Cowardin assured The Center Square that the department is always working on improving Virginia’s roads and motorways. The department completed a couple of “systemic, high-return” projects deploying high-visibility traffic signal backplates and flashing left-turn signal arrows in 2021. There are three more similar enhanced traffic control device projects involving curve delineation, unsignalized intersections and pedestrian signal crossings that are currently underway and will be finished by 2025. Together, the projects are worth \$109 million, according to Cowardin.

The projects are part of “eight Federal Highway Administration proven countermeasures” identified in a systemic safety strategy by the Commonwealth Transportation Board in 2019. The strategy also identified \$43 million in pavement enhancements to be deployed after a longer-term resurfacing program, including centerlines, shoulder rumble strips and pavement shoulder wedges.

Those are just a few projects the department is executing under its Virginia Highway Safety Improvement Program. “Each of these VHSIP systemic projects are expected to implement the Safe System Approach guiding principles in our Strategic Highway Safety Plan and drive down the fatalities and serious injuries from crashes on our roadway network,” Cowardin said.

The department funds millions of dollars of improvements across several funding programs. In the VHSIP alone, in fiscal year 2023, Virginia allocated \$135 million for safety improvements and behavior strategies.

More taxpayer dollars are being directed to roadway improvements in recent years, not just in Virginia, but across the country. In 2017, the U.S. had “a \$146 billion backlog in needed roadway safety improvements,” according to a [report](#) from the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety [cited by TRIP](#). With the passage of the \$1.2 trillion Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act in 2021, however, \$454 billion has been allocated through 2026 for America’s transportation infrastructure, “a 38% increase in federal investment starting in 2022,” according to TRIP.

However, none of the numerous investments and ongoing safety and maintenance projects will ever negate personal responsibility, though they can help motorists more easily navigate roads and avoid accidents.

“This work is not easy,” Cowardin told The Center Square. “Part of making our roads safer means everyone must make a collective commitment to remove distractions, buckle up, follow the posted speed limit, keep a safe following distance between vehicles and never drive under the influence of alcohol or drugs.”

TRIP said in its report that the pandemic's increase in traffic fatalities seemed to be due mostly to an increase in riskier driving behaviors.