

Traffic deaths in NC rise 29% over last decade, new report finds

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File photo of 4 vehicles involved in crash on River Rd. near Crofters Ct. in Leland (Courtesy: WWAY)

WILMINGTON, NC (WWAY) — A new report reveals that while traffic fatalities in North Carolina have declined slightly since 2021, the overall number of deadly crashes has surged 29% over the past decade. The findings are part of a national report released Tuesday by TRIP, a Washington, D.C.-based transportation research nonprofit.

The report, *Addressing America's Traffic Safety Crisis*, analyzes traffic fatality trends from 2014 to 2024 and calls for a comprehensive, nationwide strategy to improve roadway safety. It found that North Carolina's traffic fatality rate per 100 million vehicle miles traveled rose 15% during the same 10-year span.

Despite recent national progress, where U.S. traffic fatalities have declined each year since 2021, fatal crashes remain significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels. TRIP attributes the initial spike in fatalities in 2020 and 2021 to risky driver behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic, including speeding, impaired driving, and failure to wear seat belts.

In 2024 alone, fatal and serious crashes in North Carolina led to an estimated \$72 billion in economic and quality-of-life costs, according to TRIP. That includes \$17.9 billion in tangible economic losses and \$54.1 billion tied to lost lifespan, long-term impairments, and pain.

"This report underscores the urgent need for sustained investment and coordinated action to reverse the troubling trend in traffic fatalities," said Mike Hare, chairman of the board of the American Traffic Safety Services Association (ATSSA). "While recent declines are encouraging, the human and economic toll remains far too high."

Nationwide, traffic fatalities rose 20% between 2014 and 2024, while the fatality rate per 100 million VMT increased 11%, the report found. Pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorcyclists have been especially impacted:

- **Pedestrian deaths** rose 14% from 2019 to 2024.
- **Bicyclist fatalities** increased by 31% in the same period.
- **Motorcyclist fatalities** jumped 24% from 2019 to 2024, with a fatality rate 29 times higher than that of passenger vehicle occupants.

Work zone crashes are also a growing concern. Between 2019 and 2023, highway work zone crashes killed 131 people in North Carolina and 4,470 nationwide, a 6% increase over that period.

Jake Nelson, director of traffic safety advocacy at AAA, said the numbers reflect a "decade-long surge" in deadly crashes that demands immediate action.

"Our roads are still way too dangerous—especially for people walking, biking, or on motorcycles," Nelson said. "We know what works. Now it's time to act."

The report cites speeding, impaired and distracted driving, and lower seat belt use as key contributors to the fatality surge. For example, deaths from alcohol-related crashes increased 22% from 2019 to 2023, while speeding-related deaths rose 16%.

To reverse the trend, the U.S. Department of Transportation launched a National Roadway Safety Strategy in 2022. The plan promotes a "Safe System" approach that focuses on safer people, roads, vehicles, and speeds, as well as better post-crash emergency care.

The report also highlights the importance of infrastructure investment, pointing to the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA), which provides \$454 billion through 2026 for highways and transit. Specific safety programs under the IIJA include:

- \$6 billion for Safe Streets and Roads for All
- \$17 billion for the Highway Safety Improvement Program
- \$4 billion for crash data and vehicle safety programs
- \$300 million for rural road safety
- \$120 million for tribal road safety

TRIP Executive Director Dave Kearby called for a continued focus on long-term investments in roadway safety.

"While it is good news that the number of traffic fatalities is trending downward in recent years, the sharp increase... over the past decade must be addressed," Kearby said. "Making a commitment to eliminating fatal and serious injuries on the nation's roadways will require robust investment and coordinated [action]."

The full report, including state-by-state data, [is available here](#).