

Transportation

Oklahoma roadways see uptick in traffic deaths, report finds

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Graycen Wheeler / KOSU

Traffic on I-44 in Oklahoma City.

Research from a national transportation research nonprofit shows the state has seen higher traffic fatalities in recent years. This comes as the Oklahoma Highway Patrol is urging road safety practices after responding to a series of roadway fatalities across the state last weekend.

Lt. Mark Southall, the OHP's public information officer, said the agency responded to seven collisions that led to ten deaths and three drownings in the waters it patrols. "So in almost my 20 years of doing this career in the Oklahoma Highway Patrol, I've never seen such a deadly weekend as what we had last weekend," Southall said.

As the patrol began to get more calls, he said they wanted to notify the public of the high death rate, remind people to drive safely, remind boaters to wear life jackets and not mix drinking with water activities. In general, Southall said the causes were common laws being broken, like speeding or texting and driving.

This month Trip, a national transportation research nonprofit, released [the report](#) "Addressing America's Traffic Safety Crisis." Carolyn Kelly, Trip's director of communications and research, said the organization found traffic fatalities sharply increased during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021.

She said Oklahoma follows this trend even though travel on the nation's roadways decreased. In the report, Oklahoma is ranked No. 13 among the states in 2024 with the highest traffic fatality rates.

During this time, Kelly said drivers changed their behavior. She said they were speeding more, seatbelt

and helmet use went down and more drivers drove under the influence of drugs or alcohol more often, resulting in more traffic-related deaths. "Now the good news is in the last few years since that spike in traffic fatalities, the numbers of fatalities have come down nationwide," Kelly said. "But the bad news is that traffic fatalities as a whole are still significantly higher than they were a decade ago."

In 2024, Oklahoma also [ranked No. 14](#) in the top states with the highest rural road fatality rate, according to the nonprofit. Kelly said Oklahoma's rural traffic fatality rate is [almost double](#) the fatality rate on all other roads, and one of the reasons for this is how the roads are constructed.

Overall, Kelly said human behavior is the leading cause of crashes and fatalities on the road, and the roadway itself could contribute up to a third of those crashes.

Lt. Southall said human error and violating state laws are the leading causes for crashes. Though occasionally, there are situations called "incidences" prompted by factors like a medical emergency. In rural areas, he said, the patrol has noticed an uptick in collisions.

He said the department does not have a large footprint in rural spaces and [starting in November](#), the patrol is hoping to increase its presence with troopers at interstates, 24-hour coverage and rural counties.

"So that's, you know, something that we're concerned with and something that we're addressing here in the near future," Southall said.