

Report: Connecticut Has Nation's Deadliest Rural Roads

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- [Highway and Road Transportation](#)

They carry only about 10 percent of all vehicle traffic in Connecticut, but the winding, rural “back roads” between towns saw more than 40 percent of all traffic fatalities in the state in 2013.

At about 3.6 fatalities per 1 million vehicle miles, Connecticut’s back roads are the most deadly in the nation, according to a new report.

There were 111 fatalities on rural roads and 276 all together in 2013, a year punctuated by the deaths of eight teens in car crashes during the summer months.

Connecticut also ranked No. 11 nationally for the percentage of rural pavement in poor condition, according to the report, published TRIP, by a Washington, D.C. non-profit group that advocates for highway safety.

The fatality rate on rural roads is up sharply from 2012, when 62 fatalities put the rate at 1.95 per million vehicle miles, said Rocky Moretti, director of policy and research at TRIP and the author of the report. He defined a “rural road” as any non-Interstate road outside a population center of 2,500 to 5,000 people — “so basically once you go out into a low density area, that’s it.”

Many factors make the back roads more dangerous, including “a lack of desirable roadway safety features, longer emergency vehicle response times and the higher speeds traveled on rural roads compared to urban roads,” according to the report.

Speed, distracted and impaired driving, and Connecticut’s aging infrastructure all contribute to the fatality rate, said John Elsesser, town manager of Coventry and president of the Council of Small Towns.

“Some of it is not driving well or appropriately for the types of roads we have,” he said. And “Connecticut drivers are known for having a slightly heavy foot — it’s a recipe for fatalities.”

The report also noted that rural roads were more likely to have dangers such as narrow lanes, limited shoulders, sharp curves, pavement drop-offs and steep slopes, as well as inconsistencies in design.

“Roads in Connecticut are old roads,” Elsesser said. “Our roads are maybe 300 years old — that means they were originally horse-and-buggy and cart paths,” which were not designed for stop-and-go intersections, but rather with big curves.

“They were narrow and windy and steep,” he said. “It all leads to fatalities.”

One of the most notorious stretches of road in Connecticut is Route 6 through Bolton, Andover, Columbia and Coventry — known locally as “Suicide 6” for its high rate of crashes.

But since the Department of Transportation made improvements in the area in recent years, the severity rate has dropped dramatically, Elsesser said.

“So when there’s a long-term plan, you can make [the roads] safer,” he said.

“Over the decades, some roads have been improved, and some haven’t. Typically what they did was add oil, then some tar, but they never went back and added drainage. That’s why this winter people were asking us to put up double-black-diamonds on the frost heaves.”

The report encouraged use of low-cost safety measures, such as rumble strips.

But simply maintaining roads is difficult enough, Elsesser said, even with \$60 million in grants to towns for roads in the state budget.

“We’re better than we were four years ago,” Elsesser said. “We’re certainly in a major catch-up mode.”

Since the state lacks regional government, towns have to pick up the tab for road improvements that state grants don’t cover, he said.

“It’s still not enough,” Elsesser said. “In our town, the citizens funded a \$3 million road bond to try to help catch up, but that will only do some improvements and surface treatments, and only on 17 percent of our roads.”

“The order of magnitude is huge,” he said.

Other states with high rates of fatalities on rural roads were South Carolina, Florida, Montana and Arizona, according to the report.

The report used data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Federal Highway Administration, the Bureau of Transportation Statistics, the Council of State Governments and more in its analysis. TRIP “researches, evaluates and distributes economic and technical data on surface transportation issues” and is sponsored by “insurance companies, equipment manufacturers, distributors and suppliers; businesses involved in highway and transit engineering and construction; [and] labor unions,” according to its website.

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