

At the time of this writing in September 2020, the United States was in a midst of the covid-19 pandemic. This has had an impact on surface transportation travel and safety, which is being summarized below so that data and trends from 2020 can be put in proper context during future revisions of the Safety Action Plan. As will be seen, even though overall economic activity decreased, some types of travel were impacted more significantly than others, and some types of travel may have increased. Significant attention will need to be paid to the 2020 (and potentially 2021) crash data on a disaggregated basis, as the pandemic is likely to have different impacts depending on the mode of transportation and / or crash type under investigation. This will be an important consideration to the SPC Safety Action Plan since it examines trends in fairly specific detail. While it may be possible to rely on some national level guidance on the interpretation of crash data from the pandemic, each state developed their own response to the pandemic, leading to different conditions from state-to-state and even region-to-region. Also, while it may be tempting to anticipate that data from 2020 will be disregarded as atypical in future safety analyses, this is not likely to be the case, as (1) the pandemic is likely to stretch through at least the middle of 2021, eliminating much more than one year as not useful; (2) the post-pandemic transportation situation is likely to retain some of the attributes of the pandemic, and as such will not be able to be fully disregarded; and (3) there may be some important safety lessons to be learned by contrasting the crash experience during the pandemic against the pre- and post-pandemic conditions.

A description of key events impacting transportation in southwestern Pennsylvania are as follows:

- The first case of covid-19 in the United States was confirmed by the CDC on January 21, although covid-19 was not reported heavily in the popular media until late February and early March.
  - On March 13, the federal government declared a National Emergency in response to covid-19.
  - On March 19, Pennsylvania issued a statewide shutdown of all non-life sustaining businesses, including the closure of all non-essential businesses, schools, and special events. Any person capable of telework was asked to do so.
    - The result was a dramatic decrease in vehicular volumes. During this time, it was anecdotally expected that speeding increased due to the increased opportunities provided by lower traffic volumes.
    - Transit ridership plunged due to fears of contracting the disease on the transit vehicle.
    - There was also an increased reliance on deliveries as opposed to in-store shopping, thus impacting truck travel.
    - Nationally, it was anticipated that pedestrian and bicycle activity increased as alternatives such as transit or ride-sharing became less attractive.
    - Rest areas were ordered closed on March 17. Thirteen of PennDOT's 30 rest areas were reopened the next day with portable restrooms. On March 24, indoor facilities were reopened at 23 locations. Some rest areas remained closed until May. This could have led to increased drowsy driving.
  - On May 8, Pennsylvania began to lift stay-at-home restrictions in some parts of the state, but generally not in the SPC region. On May 15, Pennsylvania lifted the shutdown order and moved to the "yellow" phase in most of SPC region, including Allegheny County, but excluding Beaver County. On June 5, the counties in the SPC region were moved to the "green" phase which eased more restrictions but did not alleviate all restrictions. In May and June, travel began to increase on roadways as businesses began to reopen.
-

- On July 15, restaurants and bars were forced to reduced occupancy and closure in response to a second wave of the virus. Restaurants and bars were permitted to set up tables outside in sidewalks and on-street parking stalls as a means of serving more customers, which posed additional obstacles in the sidewalks and streets for those users.
- With the decrease in air travel due to fears of contracting the disease, some potential travelers canceled trips, while other travelers elected to drive long distances.
- Due to limitations on the size of gatherings, there were virtually no special events such as concerts or sporting events. The Pittsburgh Penguins played their last game in Pittsburgh on March 8, while the Pittsburgh Pirates did not allow in-person spectators to their games played in PNC Park. High school sports began the school year with very limited to no in-person spectators.
- It is anticipated that traffic patterns were back to near-normal by mid-summer in the less-dense portions of the outlying counties, where infection rates remained relatively low and most travel is by personal automobile. However, patterns in these areas will be impacted by fall 2020 school reopening school plans.
- Office workers that could telecommute continued to do so in large numbers throughout the transition to the yellow and green phases of reopening. Business travel for meetings was also expected to be impacted, as a large proportion of business meetings were also held virtually.
- School reopening plans for the fall of 2020 were prepared by each individual school district. Many elected to remain online only or use a hybrid model in which only part of the student body attends each day, with students typically attending in person two days per week and attending online three days per week. City of Pittsburgh schools started the year with 100% virtual learning on September 8.
- The University of Pittsburgh brought students back to campus for an August 19 start date. However, they began the school year with 92% of courses being offered virtually. On September 14, the University began offering more in-person learning while still allowing the virtual option for those that choose it.

For a graphic illustrating trends in the spread in the virus, please see the [FIGURE A](#) on the next page from the official Pennsylvania website, which shows the number of cases per day in Allegheny County from the beginning of the pandemic to the date of this writing, September 17, 2020.

---

Figure A – Covid-19 Cases per Day in Allegheny County (Source: pa.gov)

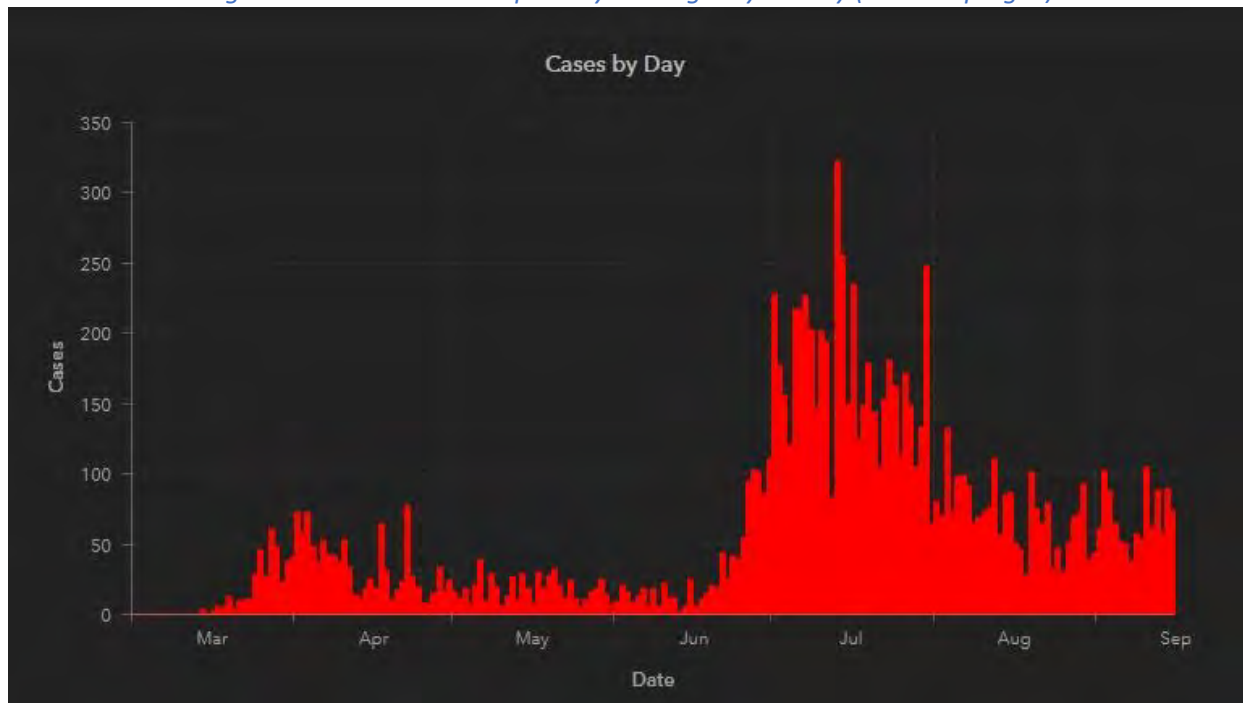


TABLE A gives a sample of how vehicular travel was impacted throughout the pandemic using data from four permanent count stations in the region. It compares travel on a certain date to the same time in 2019 to provide a rough assessment of the impacts on vehicular travel. As can be seen, the impacts on travel depended on time and the location in the region. Additional study will be required in the future to provide a more complete and detailed assessment of the impact on vehicular travel demand. Impacts on other modes, such as pedestrian and bicycle travel, will likely need to be estimated anecdotally due to lack of data.

Table A – Sampling of 24-Hour Traffic Volumes During the Pandemic from PennDOT Continuous Count Stations

Location	I-279 N of Pittsburgh	US 40 West of Uniontown	I-70 West of Monongahela River	US 22 at New Alexandria
April 15, 2020 (Wednesday)	23,820 (-59%)	5,656 (-36%)	20,633 (-43%)	11,851 (-50%)
April 17, 2019	57,559	8,832	36,032	23,572
May 21, 2020 (Thursday)	37,105 (-35%)	7,305 (-14%)	27,846 (-4%)	18,113 (-23%)
May 23, 2019	57,435	8,509	29,112	23,613
June 26, 2020 (Friday)	47,955 (-22%)	8,726 (-1%)	32,537 (-19%)	22,253 (-17%)
June 28, 2019	61,714	8,827	40,271	26,951
August 15, 2020 (Saturday)	40,641 (-28%)	6,507 (-14%)	12,167 (-58%)	19,688 (-15%)
August 17, 2019	56,726	7,569	29,087	23,197
September 8, 2020 (Tuesday)	43,708 (-24%)	7,557 (-13%)	Not Available	19,512 (-11%)
September 10, 2019	57,780	8,701		22,000

In addition, covid-19 is having an impact on transportation safety, and funds have been expended to mitigate the risks of contracting the disease as part of the transportation system. Transit is the most prominent example of this but there are others as well, such as interstate rest areas. This SAP acknowledges that improving transportation safety includes addressing covid-19 concerns, and that future funds will likely need to be devoted to this effort. However, identifying what strategies are appropriate is beyond the scope of this document, as it is subject to future research and guidance from Federal and State leadership, as well as future developments in the pandemic.

---