

Rappahannock's main drag, ROUTE 211, is home to gorgeous vistas — and lots of car crashes. Sometimes they go hand-in-hand

BY BEN PETERS

Rappahannock News staff

While U.S. Route 211 is Rappahannock County's main artery with bucolic mountainside viewsheds, it's also the road where drivers are most likely to wind up in a crash.

The road in the past five years has been home to more than three times the number of crashes on U.S. Route 522, which holds the second highest accident incidence in the county, according to data from the Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles.

That's not surprising: More crashes occur on 211 simply because there's more traffic along it than any other road in the county. This correlation is expected and is used as a marker to indicate good road design, state highway officials say. Frequent crashes on roads that aren't very busy could be a sign of a poorly designed road.

A look — not while we were driving — at accident data found deer-related crashes on 211 and other county roads accounted for almost half of all accidents in 2022. Speed-related collisions are behind deer as Rappahannock's second most common type of crash.

Speed limits on a stretch of 211 west of Sperryville have been a point of contention between county officials and the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) in recent years. Members of the Rappahannock County Board of Supervisors have unsuccessfully tried several times to appeal with state transportation officials for a speed decrease, citing speed-related crashes and resident and business complaints.

Last week, the Supervisors authorized the county to apply for five permanent and two temporary speed display signs that will be positioned in areas of 211 and 522 where speeding is deemed a safety issue.

The signs will flash a driver's speed as they pass by, with the goal of storing traffic data and encouraging drivers to slow down as they enter villages. They're also intended for the county to gather figures to potentially present to the Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT) in a bid to reduce the speeds along certain segments of road.

Emergency Services Coordinator Sean Polster, who deferred most questions on road safety to VDOT and the Virginia State Police (VSP), said a very small proportion of EMS calls the county receives are related to car crashes. Heart attacks and other health emergencies are much more common,

he said. About a third of the 762 car accidents in Rappahannock between 2018 and 2022 resulted in at least one injury, while four were fatal, according to DMV data.

Rappahannock County Sheriff Connie Compton, whose agency enforces traffic laws alongside VSP, did not return an interview request.

The county lacks authority to make significant changes to road conditions. That power remains vested in VDOT,

"I wasn't paying attention, you know, just a beautiful ride."

Coffey said VSP receives many citizen complaints about speeding on 211, and it's not uncommon to see a patrol vehicle parked hidden behind a hill on the median with a speed gun at the ready.

"We're not trying to catch anybody, but if they happen to be out there when we are, our main job is promoting highway safety and that includes



which is reliant on funding received from the legislature. "At the end of the day, they own the roads — we don't," Polster said of the state.

While car crashes are down in Rappahannock since 2018, there may also be accidents that don't cause a tremendous amount of damage and aren't reported to authorities, according to VSP Public Information Officer Brent Coffey. That suggests the state's recorded totals of accidents is likely an undercount.

Coffey said in an interview most crashes the agency works are speed-related or involve distracted drivers, people on their phones or drivers otherwise not paying attention. Many drivers stopped by VSP are also tourists from out-of-county, Coffey said.

"In Rappahannock, it's such a beautiful area, it's easy to just ride around and kind of get lost not paying attention," he said. "I know with the troopers, typically when people are getting stopped ... they're saying, 'Oh,

stopping vehicles, issuing summons ... So even just driving around in that area is part of it as well — just being visible to citizens," he said of traffic enforcement on the road.

And, to answer an age-old question: No, state troopers don't have a monthly quota of speeding tickets to write, according to Coffey.

VDOT Spokesperson Lou Hatter, who used to regularly travel from Sperryville to Warrenton for work, said it's easy to become "lulled" into a sense of false security on 211 since there is lower traffic volume past Warrenton heading toward Rappahannock.

"I think there is a tendency more for regular users of a road to get into more of an autopilot mode and be less attentive," VDOT Culpeper District Traffic Engineer Steve Frooman said. "It's really which is more impactful? That familiarity where you're not lost, not trying to figure out where you are and where to go versus, 'I drive this everyday, I'm not going to pay as much attention,'" he said.

Overall, 211 is below the Culpeper district and statewide crash average, which the agency bases on the length of the road and the number of drivers who use it, according to Frooman. While VDOT believes crash rates are more important road safety data points to consider, officials said there is value in considering the raw numbers of crashes.

They use raw data to pinpoint specific areas that may be of concern and expose potentially problematic patterns of driving activity, Frooman said. "The roads themselves are not dangerous," Hatter said. "There are areas where there tend to be higher crash rates than others."

"Run-off-the-road" crashes are another problem in Rappahannock County, Frooman said. On 522 north of 211, the agency is planning to widen the shoulder this coming summer to install rubble strips on a large segment to help reduce the likelihood of drivers running off the road. VDOT recently considered undertaking a similar project on 211, but it didn't make the cut when the agency sought funding from the state.

Route 211 is below the regional VDOT district and statewide crash average, which is based on the length of the road and the number of drivers who use it. But there are plenty of accidents, like this one last weekend.

BY DENNIS BRACK

Deer crashes are a tougher nut to crack since the animals are mobile and somewhat unpredictable, Frooman said. Unlike drivers who react when placed in a perilous situation on the road, deer aren't so smart. Coffey called deer crashes an often unavoidable "act of nature."

But the rate of deer crashes on 211 isn't any more numerous than elsewhere in the county, making them a threat everywhere, Frooman said. And then there are the bears and cows that occasionally wander into our multitasking paths zooming along 211. The state police spokesman's pronouncement: "When you're in the vehicle just drive."

CRASHES IN RAPPAHANNOCK COUNTY

More crashes occur on 211 simply because there's more traffic along it than any other road in the county. This correlation is expected and is used as a marker to indicate good road design, officials say.

Total crashes
2018-2022
762

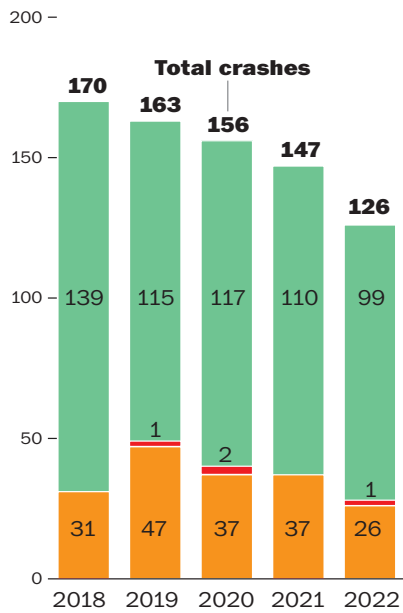
Total injuries
2018-2022
249

Total fatalities
2018-2022
4

Crashes by type

Total crashes have gone down, as have the number of crashes involving injuries.

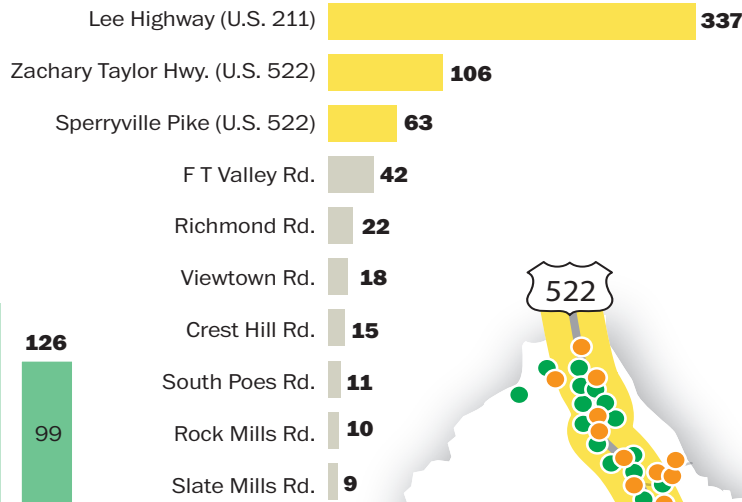
- Cars/property involved
- Fatality involved
- Injury involved



Note: the numbers above are not total injuries, but total crashes with at least one injury

10 most dangerous roads

Not surprisingly, Lee Highway, the main artery through the county has the most crashes. Total crashes from 2018 through 2022:

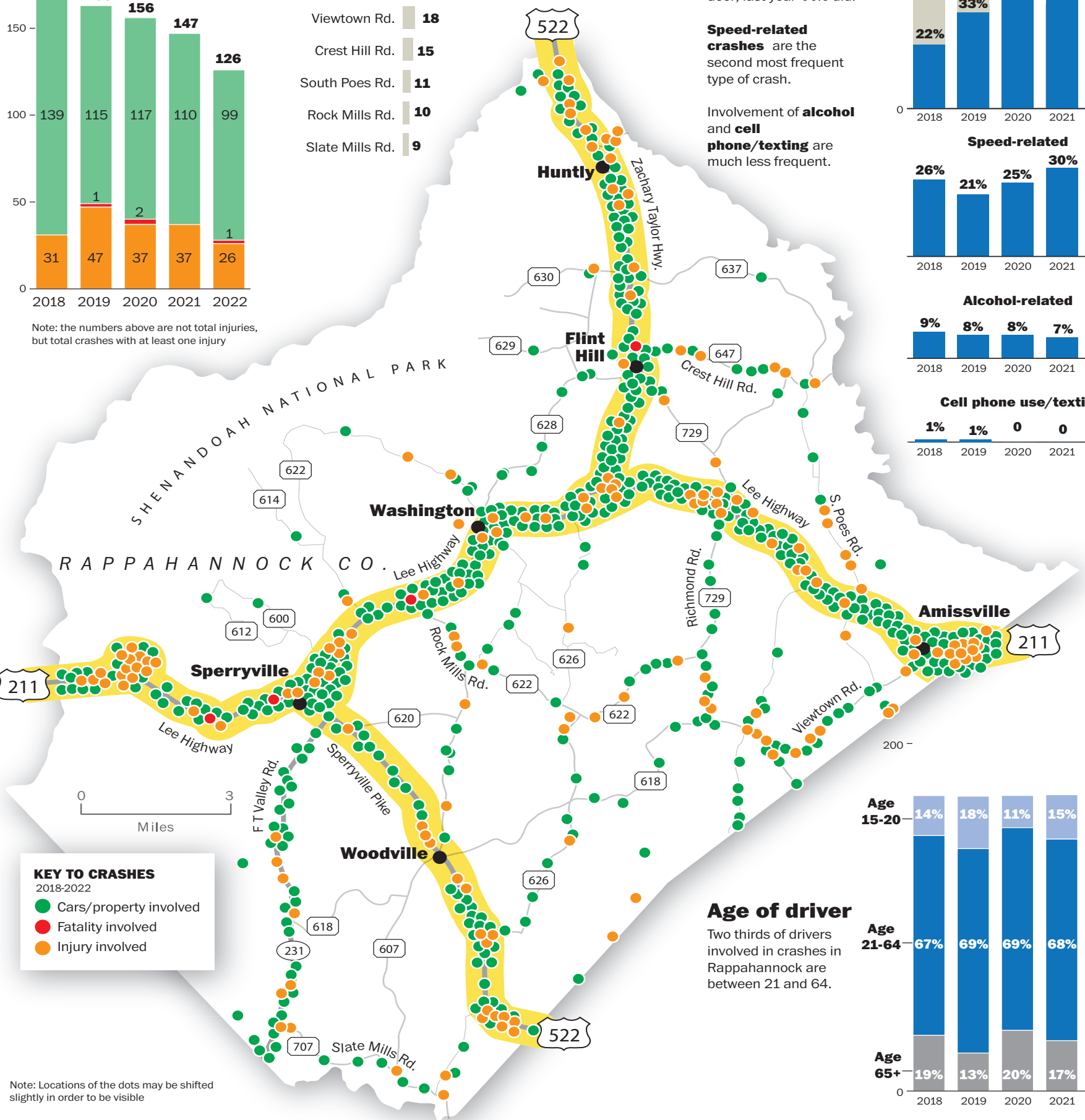
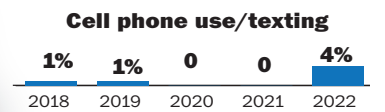
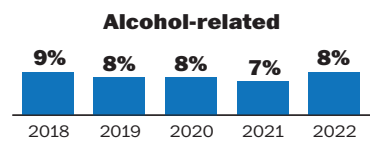
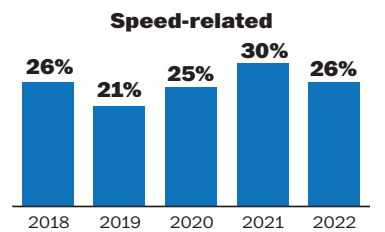
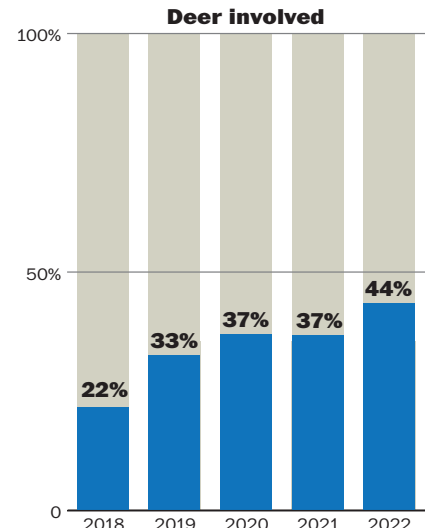


Causes of crash

More than **one in three** crashes involved a **deer** in 2022. Even as the number of overall crashes has dropped, the number of deer/car collisions has held fairly steady, meaning a higher proportion of crashes involve deer. In 2018, **22%** of crashes involved deer; last year **44%** did.

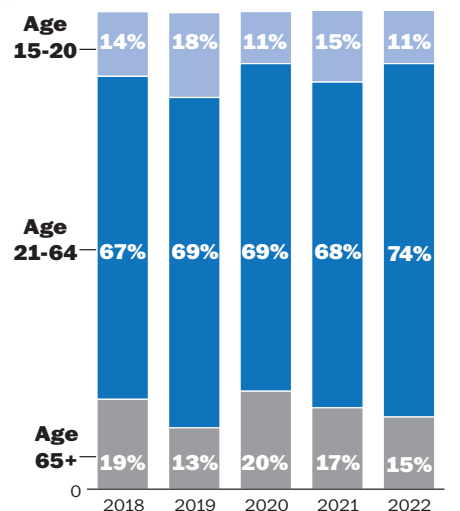
Speed-related crashes are the second most frequent type of crash.

Involvement of **alcohol** and **cell phone/texting** are much less frequent.



Age of driver

Two thirds of drivers involved in crashes in Rappahannock are between 21 and 64.



Note: Locations of the dots may be shifted slightly in order to be visible

Source: Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles

By Ben Peters and Laura Stanton for Rappahannock News and Foothills Forum