

40% of state road deaths in 2002 involved alcohol

By Ginny MacDonald, News Staff Writer

Drunken driving has pushed Alabama's highway death toll up to its highest point in four years.

Forty percent of all highway fatalities last year were alcohol-related and most of those wrecks happened early on Sunday mornings. The critical time was between 1 and 3 a.m. on Sundays, about the time most bars closed.

"Most people are off on weekends and a number of people frequent bars or taverns," said state trooper spokesman Sgt. Will Rogers. "Then they drive after they have had too much to drink and they wind up getting in a wreck.

"People begin to move around in the wee hours of the morning and sometimes they're drunk and on unfamiliar roads," Rogers said.

Alabama alcohol-related highway fatalities increased 10 percent in 2002 over the previous year. They rose from 374 in 2001 to 413 in 2002, according to the Fatality Analysis Reporting System of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Overall, the total number of Alabama highway fatalities increased 4 percent last year to 1,033 from 998 in 2001.

One theory about the increase in alcohol-related deaths is the increase in the number of vehicles on the road and that more people are drinking to escape difficult economic times.

Peggy Batey, executive director of Mothers Against Drunk Driving in Montgomery, said alcohol makes life easier for people who have lost their jobs or life's savings in the stock market.

"The sad thing about it is that all these fatalities are 100 percent preventable," Batey said.

The high number of alcohol-related deaths does not surprise Col. Mike Coppage, director of the Alabama Department of Public Safety.

"Driving while impaired has always been a major cause of deaths on the highway," Coppage said. "That's why we need more roadblocks, we need more troopers on the road and we need to be more visible."

Nationally, 41 percent of the 17,419 fatal crashes involved alcohol use, 1 percentage point higher than Alabama's 40 percent.

There was one alcohol-related fatality every 30 minutes across the nation last year, according to the Traffic Safety Administration. There were also 258,000 people injured in alcohol-related wrecks. The rate of alcohol involvement in the U.S. was three times as high at night.

The highest intoxication rates nationally and in fatal crashes last year were recorded for drivers ages 21 to 24 (33 percent) followed by ages 25 to 34 (28 percent) and ages 35 to 44 (26 percent).

Alabama does not mirror those national statistics. In state fatal crashes, 29 percent of deaths were ages 25 to 34.

Last year on Alabama highways, 60 percent or 620 of the drivers involved in fatal wrecks were sober. Forty-three or 4 percent of the drivers had a blood-alcohol content of 0.01 percent to 0.07, and 370 drivers involved in fatal wrecks or 36 percent had a blood-alcohol content greater than 0.08 percent.

In Alabama, 0.08 percent determines whether a person is legally intoxicated.

Alabama moved up from 16th to 15th place nationally in the number of alcohol-related deaths in 2002. The state tied Florida at 15th in 2002.

Wreck reports are also analyzed by the Critical Analysis Reporting Environment at the University of Alabama, which has issued annual reports since 1997.

A university official said the CARE statistics are based on the investigating officer's opinion of alcohol-use and not on blood-alcohol content, which the Traffic Safety Administration uses. That difference has caused the state figures from the university to be low. In 2002, CARE reported there were 208 alcohol-related fatal wrecks in Alabama and 215 in 2001. But the federal government reports there were 413 such deaths in 2002 and 374 in 2001.

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