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UA Study Reveals Traffic Patterns Over Thanksgiving Holiday

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. – With the holidays approaching, thousands of Alabamians will soon hit the roads to visit family. Historically, the most dangerous day to travel over the Thanksgiving holiday has been Wednesday. Recent trends have people traveling earlier in the week, but this doesn't necessarily make the trip any safer.

The University of Alabama *CARE* Research & Development Laboratory researches crash statistics for the state and found some interesting results related to holiday travel for the last few years.

Typically, the Thanksgiving holiday has been the worst holiday during the year for motorists. In past years, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving had the most number of crashes occurring on Alabama roadways. In the last couple of years, many schools have changed holiday schedules, allowing families to leave on Monday or Tuesday. This has caused Alabama roadways to have a higher traffic concentration on all three days as opposed to the previous super concentration just on Wednesday.

In 2005, the Monday before and the Monday after Thanksgiving crash statistics were higher than the Wednesday before the holiday. The weather on both of these Mondays was quite wet compared to Wednesday, which was clear. So, in addition to people from out-of-town driving in an unfamiliar area, the weather greatly impacted the number of crashes.

"By spreading out the traffic patterns over the entire holiday week, there are more crashes earlier in the week," explained Dr. Allen Parrish, professor of computer science and director of UA's *CARE* Research & Development Laboratory. "While this has occurred, the total number of crashes over the entire week has remained about the same. This makes Wednesday potentially a little safer than when everyone was on the road at the same time."

"However, the effect of the weather shows that if you have the flexibility of when to drive, you might choose to avoid bad weather days. Last year, weather seemed to play a larger role than traffic concentration," continued Parrish.

Animal crashes were also high during the Thanksgiving week in 2005, with 50 percent more than the typical week. With the beginning of the deer hunting season, people need to be more aware when driving at or just after dusk because that is when deer are most active this time of year.

During the Thanksgiving week, the total number of crashes is actually lower when compared to the typical work week. The total number of crashes is reduced during the Thanksgiving week because there are fewer commercial and commuter travelers on the road on Thursday and Friday.

However, although the number of crashes is lower, there are more fatal crashes during that week. Studies show these fatal crashes can be accounted for primarily by the increased use of alcohol during the holiday weekend. Alcohol fatalities usually occur in rural areas and late at night, so this might also be a combination to avoid when choosing driving routes. Christmas and New Year's traffic patterns tend to be better overall because the holiday is spread during a longer period of time, so no one day has the same high concentration as just before the Thanksgiving holiday. Traveling on Christmas Day and New Year's Day are safer days to be on the road than other days because traffic is relatively light.

For the week between Christmas and New Year's, many people are out of work and school, so every night is similar to a typical Friday or Saturday night. If you factor in the holiday parties, the DUI rate increases dramatically.

According to Parrish, combinations of alcohol and speed crashes are the cause of most of the fatal crashes in Alabama during the holidays. He stated that if you conform to the following list of behaviors, it will almost eliminate the probability of being involved in a fatal crash:

Never drink and drive, or ride with anyone who has even had a single drink.

Avoid late-night hours when others who have been drinking are more apt to be driving.

Observe the speed limit, move along with the traffic and keep a safe distance from other vehicles on the roadway. Reducing your speed by 10 miles per hour can reduce the likelihood of a fatal crash by 50 percent.

Always wear your restraints regardless of how long the trip, and keep the kids properly restrained in the back seat.

Watch the weather reports and plan your trip accordingly.

If you are driving at or right after dusk, be particularly aware of deer activity, especially on rural roads; watch for deer so that you will not be surprised and over-react.

UA's *CARE* Research & Development Laboratory uses leading edge technologies to offer products and specialized software development services in a variety of areas, particularly traffic safety and law enforcement. The CRDL has designed an electronic citation system for use by law enforcement officers in the state of Alabama. The system was piloted by troopers enforcing commercial truck regulations and is currently being deployed to the remaining state troopers. Additionally, the CRDL routinely provides a variety of safety studies and planning documents, such as the Crash Facts Books and Highway Safety Plans.

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