

Driving is dangerous Thanksgiving week

Tom Smith (Senior Staff Writer)

Florence police Lt. Tony Barnett wasn't surprised to hear that the day before Thanksgiving has become one of the worst for traffic accidents.

"Traffic (that day) is typically very heavy, but for us, November in general is usually bad (for traffic accidents)," said Barnett, supervisor of the department's crash reduction unit.

A recent study by the University of Alabama shows that the day before Thanksgiving was one of the worst crash days in 2007.

Statistics indicate that on the day before Thanksgiving, there were 585 accidents, compared to 196 on Thanksgiving Day.

"It's by far one of the busiest driving days of the year, probably more than Christmas," said Clay Ingram, a spokesman for AAA in Birmingham.

Ingram said in many areas, schools are out Wednesday and many people take that day or part of the day off work.

"The holiday has been stretched so that it really includes Wednesday," Ingram said. "It's a heavy traffic day, and anytime you have traffic that heavy, it makes everything more dangerous."

Eddie Russell, program coordinator for the North Alabama Highway Safety Office in Tusculumbia, said drivers often become aggressive in heavy traffic.

"They get impatient. You'll see them weaving in and out of traffic," Russell said. "They get that 'can't wait to get there' attitude, and when they get in a hurry, something usually happens.

"And when traffic is very congested and something happens, it's usually not good."

He said in his nine-county region, there were 270 crashes during Thanksgiving week in 2007.

In the University of Alabama study, two factors appeared to have contributed to the crashes, said Allen Parrish, who oversaw the project.

He said in 2007 there seemed to be fewer people taking off early in the week, indicated by significantly fewer crashes occurring Monday and Tuesday of Thanksgiving week.

Parrish said further analysis indicated that in 2007, the weather was rainy on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving and almost 50 percent of the crashes occurred in rainy weather. Comparatively, less than 10 crashes occurred statewide in the rain Monday and Tuesday.

Also, Parrish said that most of the crashes on the day before Thanksgiving occurred in the early afternoon and evening, with 50 percent between 1 and 6 p.m.

"This is definitely a time to be avoided on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, especially if bad weather is a possibility," said Parrish, who is professor of computer science and director of the CARE Research and Development Laboratory at Alabama.

"When people get on the road with other things on their minds and they're in a hurry, crashes can happen," said Sheffield Police Chief Greg Ray. "The holiday season is a perfect example of that."

Ray said his department traditionally sees more accidents around Thanksgiving than other times of the year.

"And that goes back to the fact there are more people out and about," he said. "Plus, I think the time change is a factor. You have more people traveling at night than usual."

Russell said that even though more crashes may be occurring, fatalities haven't made a big increase. He said in 2006 there were 19 fatalities statewide and only 11 in 2007.

"The troopers have started special projects geared toward highway safety, and I think these special efforts are paying off," Russell said. "Plus, the use of seat belts has continued to increase."

He said in 2007, 82 percent of drivers and passengers used seat belts. This year, it's 86.1 percent.

Tuscumbia police Capt. Lori Jett said drivers need to slow down and be careful.

"Knowing that this is such a heavy traffic time, people need to just be a little patient, observant and slow down," she said.

"And if they're going to travel, leave a little early, wear seat belts and use turn signals. It's better to be safe than sorry."

Ingram said there are expected to be 40 million travelers this Thanksgiving, down 1.6 million from a year ago.

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