LOUISIANA HIGHWAY SAFETY COMMISSION NEWS RELEASE
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Bad behavior fuels bad year for traffic safety in 2021

Sept. 15, 2022 – Crashes on Louisiana roads killed 972 people last year, a 17 percent increase fueled by a pandemic-related rise in impaired driving, aggressive driving, and pedestrian fatalities, according to the state's top traffic records analyst.

The 972 fatalities, the most since 2007, were inflated partly because of a disturbing 32 percent increase in DWI fatal crashes, said Dr. Helmut Schneider, executive director of the Center for Analytics and Research in Transportation Safety at LSU. Earlier this week, Schneider released the 2021 statistics to traffic safety officials, law enforcement officers, and safe driving advocates.

Some of Schneider's findings from 2021 include:

- 174 interstate fatalities, representing "a staggering" 49% increase over 2020
- an "all-time high" of 185 pedestrian fatalities, an increase of nearly 27 percent over 2020
- a 17% increase in crashes that caused moderate or severe injuries
- a 4.9% increase in motorcycle fatalities, which had been on the decline in previous years
- a 2.9% increase in bicycle fatalities

Schneider said the major causes of these spikes in roadway deaths and injuries were distracted driving, impaired driving, as well as aggressive driving, which he described as speeding, failure to yield, tailgating, improper passing, and disobeying traffic controls. He indicated the increase in aggressive driving behavior correlates with the pandemic, which continued through much of 2021.

"Driver behavior certainly changed during COVID-19," Schneider said. In 2022 and beyond, "drivers might change their behavior to be more risk-averse…but that is likely a slow process. It will take a while."

Lisa Freeman, executive director of the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission, noted that the pandemic also negatively impacted several federally funded law enforcement campaigns, such as "Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over" and "Click It or Ticket," making it tougher to clamp down on bad driving behavior.

"When our law enforcement officers have all the tools they need, and we can amplify their efforts through public messaging, we will see those numbers go down," Freeman said. "This is a pandemic-driven, national issue that virtually every state is facing."

Indeed, the grim numbers are in line with national statistics. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 42,915 people were killed on the nation's roadways in 2021. That represents the largest year-to-year increase ever reported through the nationwide Fatality Analysis Reporting System.

Freeman said the ultimate solution is for every driver and passenger to assume personal responsibility for what they do while they are operating or riding in a vehicle.

“In the end, it all comes down to the choice you make,” Freeman said. “Never drink and drive, put away all distractions, obey the rules of the road, and always wear your seat belt.”

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