DWI arrests are up, but auto fatalities haven't gone down

By LOU CHAPMAN

Drunk driving arrests in Orleans and St. Tammany are up dramatically this year, but in surrounding parishes they are way down.

Also, despite tougher laws for sentencing drunken drivers, auto fatalities in the seven-parish area for the first four months of 1983, were only two behind last year's numbers. About half of all auto fatalities are tied to drunken driving, experts say.

In New Orleans, DWI (driving while intoxicated) arrests jumped 30 percent - from 718 to 967 - for the period January 1 to April 30, compared with the same period last year, according to the New Orleans Police Department.

The increase is attributed, for the most part, to more strict law enforcement, said Ray Burt, commander of the Police Department's alcohol-accident unit, said a percent.

More district officers are now trained in DWI arrests and the operation of active probes, which are more sensitive and include tests that include the taking of the drivers, stand on one foot and a walk-a-straight line test.

In St. Tammany, DWI bookings are up 18 percent this year, according to the Department of Criminal Investigation.

A spokesman for State Police Troop L, which includes St. Tammany Parish, said a combined federal and state grant has helped pay for weekend and overtime duty to help catch drunken drivers. The grant money was made available to parishes with laconia.

In other parish areas, DWI arrests dropped within a wide range. 5 percent in Jefferson and Plaquemines, 7 percent in St. Charles.

The decreases were generally attributed to a growing public concern about the effects of drunken driving, including the consequences of the new mandatory sentencing laws.

Deputy District Attorney, 2nd District, the Orleans Parish Criminal Court's Coordinator, said law-enforcement officials believe the DWI sentencing laws have had a psychological effect on the public.

"Time will tell just how long that is going to last," Burt said. "We hope it is a trend that will continue."

The Orleans Parish, the year with a decrease in auto fatalities, according to the State Police and law enforcement officials in St. Tammany, auto fatalities dropped from 19 during the first four months of 1982 to six for the same period this year.

In the St. Tammany Parish area, highway deaths dropped from 62 to 64.

It is too early to report the percentage of defendants found guilty under the new laws, Burt said. "It is too early to tell."

But one measure of how defendants view their chances in any court - and a measure of the judges' effect on their chances down here is, "How many are not guilty?"

In Orleans Parish, about 90 percent of the defendants arrested for the first four months of 1983 pleaded guilty, in city court in 1981, 11 percent pleaded guilty.

Sentencing in these jurisdictions is swifter and more certain; there are fewer court appearances and a drug test to take up prosecutors and judges.

William Glenn, chief prosecutor for New Orleans and prosecutor for traffic court, said the party of drivers accused in New Orleans believe they have a good chance of beating a drunken driving rap.

Another recent change allows more DWI licenses to drive following the completion of the probation period, when a defendant first appears in court for a trial date, rather than waiting until the case goes before a judge for trial.

"We have no statistics that a specific type of breath-alcohol machine may be affected by drinking," the Louisiana State Police and the Department of Public Safety, responsible for all breath-alcohol testing, the 31016 specified in the machine is used in the Louisiana State Police, machines of three types, Trooper at the Louisiana State Police, military chemical testing unit.

Rando said none of the machines are used in the lab and the machine is used in more than one test. "But, when we get bad readings, because we are discussing a specific type of machine," he said.

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