La. ranked third in road deaths for 1981

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Louisiana had the third highest highway fatality rate in the nation in 1981, according to a report by the Department of Health and Human Resources.

There were 1,248 traffic fatalities in the state last year, an increase of 26 over the previous year, said Steve Young, director of the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission. He said the death toll could go as high as 1,250 when all coroner's reports are verified.

Louisiana ranked third behind Nevada and New Mexico. The rate is based on the number of fatalities per 100 million miles driven in the state. The number of miles is derived from fuel consumption figures compiled by the Federal Highway Administration, according to a spokesman for the National Safety Council in Chicago.

State Police spokesman Ronnie Jones said Louisiana ranked third in the nation in 1980. He said Louisiana's fatality rate had not really improved because of the better ranking in 1981.

"I think the other states just got worse," he said. "Historically, we've been near the top every year."

Officials blamed Louisiana's high fatality rate on alcohol-related accidents, despite a major advertising campaign and increased enforcement across the state aimed at stopping drunk drivers.

More than 50 percent of the state's traffic deaths in 1981 were believed to be alcohol-related, Young said. However, Young said the number of drunken driver deaths would have been much higher without the anti-alcohol campaign.

"We're going to have to have a perception of risk by the drunken driver," Young said. "I must know that it's a sure bet that he will be apprehended and convicted and possibly his driver's license may be taken away."

Young said unless lawmakers pass stiff laws against drunken driving, the state's death toll could rise past 1,400 in 1984.

He said the drinking driver problem in Louisiana is a social problem and said increased law enforcement may not be the final answer.

He said state police have been citing more drunken drivers, making more arrests and increasing special patrols aimed at finding drinking drivers, but over the last five years the number of alcohol-related accidents has continued to rise.

"Somewhere the system is breaking down," he said.

There is no public perception of the problem. The great majority of people in this state do not see it as a problem. They apparently have a higher proportion of people in this state who drink and drive," Jones said.

Jones said there have been recent efforts on the state and local levels to bring down the number of drunken drivers, but he said it may be some time before the results of those efforts are seen.

Some of those recent efforts in the Baton Rouge area have included limiting the hours that bars can be open.

We are pleased now that the legislature and other segments are beginning to recognize the problem we have," he said.

But locally, traffic fatalities have not been faring well so far this year.

State Police at Troop A, which covers an eight-parish area around Baton Rouge, said fatalities in their area have increased 84 percent this year over the same time last year.

So far this year, Troop A has reported 38 traffic fatalities, said Troop A spokesman Mike Edmondson. There were 19 reported during the same time last year.

However, the alcohol-related rate was better than the 1980 rate, Edmondson said. Eight persons were killed in 1980 in the Troop A area compared to 77 in 1981, he said.

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