Report: Highway deaths down
Alcohol contributed to nearly half of fatalities

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LAFAYETTE — Fewer people died in crashes on Louisiana roadways in 2002 than in 2001, but the number of people injured in crashes grew, according to a report released Thursday by the Louisiana Highway Safety Commission.

Last year, 911 people died on Louisiana roadways, down 3.8 percent from the year before. During the same period, 67,000 people were injured, an increase of 7.3 percent from a year ago.

Lafayette Parish, with 39 deaths, ranked fourth in the total number of fatalities last year; 146 people were killed in the eight-parish Acadiana region. Jim Champagne, executive director of the state highway commission and vice chairman of the Governor's DWI Taskforce, attributed the decline in fatalities to the increased use of seat belts.

“We are going up in property damage, (and) we are going up in the number of injuries, but the number of deaths is going down,” said Champagne.

Alcohol played a role in 47 percent of the fatalities — the same percentage as last year — according to the report.

Cathy Childers, director of Louisiana Mothers Against Drunk Driving, said that particular statistic is quite telling.

“It's a death toll, and it's unacceptable,” she said.

Childers said that the three legislative changes that MADD continues to push would put a significant dent in the death toll.

She was referring to MADD’s efforts to expand the state’s open-container law to cover passengers, to require repeat DWI offenders to serve out their entire license suspension and to prohibit anyone under 21 from entering a bar, all legislation that failed last year.

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Deaths

"Although we've made some legislative progress, we've not accomplished the major changes that we believe would make a difference in that number," Childers said.

Although alcohol's role in fatalities remained the same during the last two years, the report also showed that the DWI conviction rate dropped dramatically between 1994 and 2005, to 44 percent from 75 percent.

Childers said the declining prosecution success rate mirrors the drop in people taking the Breathalyzer test when stopped on suspicion of DWI.

"I am convinced that (refusals) is a key factor," said Childers, adding that advocacy groups need to do a better job monitoring the courts.

A law passed this year by the state Legislature makes it a criminal offense for a three-time DWI offender to refuse the Breathalyzer test.

"We need to see that these cases are taken seriously by our prosecutors and judges," she said.

A Times of Acadiana report published earlier this year showed that 55 percent of those formally charged with DWI in Lafayette had their charges dropped, plead down to a lesser offense or given a chance to have their record expunged.

The report also revealed that offenders under 21 were treated lightly by prosecutors, sentenced to the fullest extent of the law only 41 percent of the time.

The highway commission report also showed that the number of motorcycle-related fatalities doubled between 1997 and 2002 and the number of injuries grew by 55 percent. Last year, 65 people were killed on motorcycles.

Champagne, a longtime opponent of current law that permits motorcycle drivers to ride without a helmet, said those statistics prove it's time to change the law.

Sen. Don Cravins, D-Arnaudville, who sits on the Senate Insurance Committee, said Gov. Mike Foster's insistence on keeping helmets optional is "ill-advised."

"I think he's totally, totally wrong on this one," Cravins said. "Just from a personal perspective, it's obvious, I would think. Just look at the newspapers and television reports on motorcycle accidents and fatalities."