Baton Rouge, La. (AP) — Deaths on Louisiana highways are down 17 percent this year, and state police say that is the payoff from tougher drunk driving laws.

"There has been a change in attitude," said Lt. Ronald Jones.

Mainly, the laws made it easier to convict on driving while intoxicated charges and increased the punishment. All this in a state where drinking and driving was almost a way of life.

Thus far, traffic fatalities logged by State Police total 444, as of Nov. 1. Over the same period last year, the total was 520.

These figures do not include accidents handled by city or parish officers instead of State Police, but Lt. Jones said data from the urban areas usually follow the same curve when plotted on a graph.

The smaller death toll could not be attributed to a State Police crackdown because the number of arrests — 9,318 — was down about 1 percent.

"We think it is the threat posed by the low," Lt. Jones said. "We have always said that until we change the attitude and lifestyle we were not going to make much difference in the way things were."

Under the law, first offenders are fined $125 to $500 and face a jail term of 10 days to six months — or four days of community service and attendance at classes on substance abuse and driver education."