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Hawaii tops nation in alcohol traffic death rate

Associated Press

HONOLULU — Deathly traffic accidents in Hawai'i were more likely to involve alcohol than in any other state, according to federal government data.

Hawai'i tops the nation in the percentage of traffic deaths involving alcohol at 52 percent, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Out of 161 people who died on Hawai'i roads in 2006, 84 of them involved at least one driver, pedestrian or cyclist who had alcohol in his or her blood.

Alcohol was a factor in more than half of traffic deaths in only three other states — Rhode Island, South Carolina and Wisconsin.

In 2005, there were 140 traffic fatalities in Hawai'i, with alcohol present in 72 of them, for 51 percent.

"We don't have an exact answer as to why there's an increase," said Leah Marks, executive director for Mothers Against Drunk Driving-Hawai'i.

More than half of all traffic fatalities in the state — 90 — were on O'ahu last year, but only 31 of them involved alcohol, said Honolulu Assistant Police Chief Bryan Wauke.

Honolulu police have also stepped up enforcement against people who drive under the influence of alcohol, with 2,264 DUI arrests as of July 7 compared to 1,936 for the same period last year.

The state spends \$1.1 million per year on education campaigns and grants to county police departments for enforcement, said Scott Ishikawa, spokesman for the state Department of Transportation.

Hawai'i fared slightly better in the number of drunken driving fatalities, which are defined as those involving at least one person with a blood alcohol level higher than 0.08 percent.

There were 63 drunken driving fatalities in Hawai'i in 2006, or 39 percent of traffic fatalities, according

to the NHTSA. Only Wisconsin, South Carolina and Montana had higher percentages.

Hawai'i had the same rate of drunken driving deaths in 2005.

"We think it continues to happen because people are allowed to drive impaired," Marks said.

Nationwide, the number of traffic fatalities dropped from 43,510 in 2005 to 42,642 in 2006. The percentage of those accidents involving alcohol changed only slightly.

On the Web:

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration: www.nhtsa.gov/

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