

Independence Day Brings More Traffic Fatalities

By Dave Brown

TUSCALOOSA, Alabama – There are more fatal crashes during the days surrounding Independence Day than the rest of the year, according to an analysis of state traffic records by researchers at The University of Alabama.

During the past five years (2015-2019), the five days around the Fourth of July averaged 2.80 fatal crashes a day, 19 percent higher than the average of fatal crashes per day the rest of the year, the study by the Center for Advanced Public Safety (CAPS) at UA showed.

This came despite the finding that vehicle crashes were slightly lower during the five-day period around July Fourth, which includes the holiday along with two days before and two days after. However, the major causes of crashes around the holiday are impaired driving from alcohol or other drugs as well as speeding, both of which drive the fatality counts up.

“This is true in most states,” said Dr. David Brown, a researcher with CAPS who performed the study. “Times before and after this iconic American holiday make it one of the deadliest holiday periods of the year across the country due largely to drunk driving crashes.”

The study employed the Critical Analysis Reporting Environment, or CARE, a software analysis system developed by CAPS research and development personnel to automatically mine information from existing databases. The Alabama Law Enforcement Agency, or ALEA, provided crash records for the study.

The times of the crashes as well as the high number and proportion of run-off-the-road and single vehicle crashes all support the conclusion of speed and DUI causation, Brown said.

From 2015 to 2019, the five-day period around Independence Day averaged 1926 crashes, about 90 percent of the average from any randomly chosen five-day period throughout the year (2141 crashes). However, the five-day fourth holiday period had 2.80 fatal crashes per day compared to 2.35 per day the rest of the year, an increase of close to 20%.

Similar to other holidays, the frequency of crashes in the five-day period is lower mainly because of fewer crashes on July Fourth itself, typical of lower crashes on other holidays, as people are likely at their destinations for the holiday itself.

“To take advantage of the lower number of crashes on the Fourth itself, the best time to travel is during mid-day and before it gets dark,” Brown said.

Fatal crashes increase after 6 p.m., and occur significantly more than the typical day during the two days before and after the holiday, according to CAPS’ analysis.

While observing the traditional recommendations of not driving under the influence of drugs or alcohol or riding with drivers who fail to observe speed limits, Brown said that seat belts save many lives in otherwise fatal crashes.

“The most effective way of increasing survivability and reducing injury in all crashes is the use of restraints,” he said.

The failure to buckle up rate for those killed was 63 percent during the holiday period, higher than the rest of the year. The fatality rate for those who wore restraints was less than 1 percent.

The National Highway and Traffic Safety Administration conducts targeted media campaigns for Independence Day called “Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over” and “Buzzed Driving is Drunk Driving.” There is also extra enforcement on the roads across the country to try to reduce impaired driving over the holiday period since it is an increased problem over the Fourth.