

# **NEW: Texas leads nation in DWIs, alcohol-related wrecks**

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Texans can claim yet another dubious first: we drink and drive more than any other citizens in the country.

By extension, we also kill and injure more people doing so.

So says law enforcement officials as they roll out their annual Labor Day weekend drunken driving crackdown, which will involve more than 60,000 additional officers on the road, the money to pay their overtime, and an intense media campaign to discourage drinkers from getting behind the wheel.

"Drink, Drive, Go to Jail," is part of a nationwide campaign to lower the number of drunken-driving fatalities and injuries that occur during this holiday weekend.

One Texan is killed or injured in an alcohol-related crash every 21 minutes, according to the Texas Department of Public Safety, and more than 1,000 die every year.

This holiday weekend, it's estimated that 545 people will die across the country from drunken-driving fatalities, said Michelle Price, executive director of the South Texas Injury Prevention and Research Center. That would be like a jumbo jet full of passengers crashing with no survivors.

From Aug. 27 through Sept. 12, DPS and police officers will be out in force, focused specifically on drunken drivers. Texas was one of 14 states that received extra funding because of the state's high numbers.

Texas has such a high number of drunken scofflaws in part because there are simply more people driving more miles than almost any other state.

But even California, where drivers log even more miles, has a lower rate of drunken drivers and deaths.

California began years ago cracking down on drunken drivers and found that hitting motorists in their pocketbooks helped. Texas seems to be following suit, cranking up fines.

A DWI conviction in Bexar County costs between \$3,000 and \$15,000, said DPS Trooper Travis Hall, and with the new point/surcharge system that went into effect in September 2003, that cost could go up another couple grand, depending on the conviction.

Texans also need to pay attention to the values that allow drinking and driving to happen, Price said.

"We drive too fast," she said, noting that speed combined with alcohol makes for a particularly deadly combination. "And we don't like giving up our liberties here in Texas. Ultimately, too many people just think they can get away with it."

Not if law enforcement has their way, though, especially over the Labor Day weekend.

"If we catch you," said Hall, "I guarantee, you're go to jail."

Drinking and driving is a personal choice, he reminds, and prevention - of going to jail, of killing someone, of dying - is truly simple.

"If you're going to drink," he said. "Just don't drive.