

**Posted on Thu, May. 01, 2008**

## **80 percent of 28 traffic deaths in first four months of the year involved drunken drivers**

BY LEE HIGGINS - lhiggins@thestate.com

- Deadly Lexington crashes
- Be a safer driver

Lexington County is leading the state in traffic fatalities for the first four months of the year — with 28 deaths in 21 crashes, S.C. Highway Patrol records show.

More than 80 percent of those crashes were alcohol-related, and 80 percent of those killed weren't wearing seat belts — despite law enforcement efforts aimed specifically at reducing fatalities resulting from those factors.

This year, of the top four counties, Charleston County has had 18 fatalities on the roads, Berkeley County has had 15, and Richland County has had 14, said S.C. Highway Patrol spokesman Lance Cpl. Josef Robinson.

Of these four counties, Lexington ranks third in population, according to 2006 U.S. Census figures.

The number of deaths in Lexington County since January is six more than in the first four months of 2006 and 2007 combined, Highway Patrol statistics show.

"When we look at why, it goes straight to drunk drivers," said 1st Sgt. Kenneth Phelps, post commander for Troop One in Lexington County. "If we could eliminate the drunk drivers this year, we would only have four fatalities."

Seventeen of the 21 fatal crashes, or 81 percent, were alcohol-related, Robinson said Wednesday.

For the same period in 2007, 75 percent were alcohol-related. During 2006, 80 percent were alcohol-related, Phelps said.

Since August, the Highway Patrol has had a 12-person Fatality Reduction Operation Safety Team conducting DUI and seat-belt enforcement operations, Phelps said.

He said state troopers made 665 DUI arrests in Lexington County during 2007, putting it fourth in the state for such arrests.

Regardless of enforcement, Phelps said, Lexington County has a reputation for having a high number of impaired drivers.

The data also showed that 10 of the county's fatal crashes this year occurred on secondary roads, Robinson said.

"A lot of times, people are more comfortable on that road and more familiar with it, and they tend to relax" and can become complacent, Robinson said.

Of the dead, five were between ages 41 and 50, which is the most deaths for a single age group.

Three were younger than 21. Statistically, drivers between ages 15 and 24 are the most likely to be involved in fatal wrecks, police say.

Lexington County authorities are working to reduce those fatalities. For example, West Columbia police are offering a defensive driving program, sponsored by the S.C. chapter of the National Safety Council, aimed at young drivers.

The Alive at 25 class is an intervention program designed to help drivers and their parents learn safe practices to help avoid traffic violations and wrecks.

And in an effort to encourage young drivers to make good choices, troopers recently have been visiting Lexington County schools, including Gilbert High, urging students to be careful during prom- and graduation-related events.

That includes not driving under the influence and having the courage to take the keys from someone thinking about it, Robinson said.

Robinson also is encouraging drivers to obey the speed limit, wear seat belts and stay alert, particularly when they have passengers in their vehicles.

The more people in your car, the more likely you are to be involved in a fatal crash, Robinson said.

Lexington High School, the only high school in Lexington 1 yet to have its prom, is asking juniors and seniors to sign Prom Promise cards, pledging to stay safe, according to Lexington 1 spokeswoman Mary Beth Hill.

The Lexington One Community Coalition — a group of community leaders formed after drunken-driving accidents claimed the lives of several teens — put up posters at the school with messages about safety and staying alcohol- and tobacco-free, officials said.

S.C. lawmakers, too, have taken steps to try to reduce the number of DUI-related traffic fatalities. Last month, Gov. Mark Sanford signed off on a rewritten drunken-driving law that imposes tougher penalties and eliminates what police and victim advocates call loopholes in existing law.

The new law ties penalties to a driver's blood-alcohol level and prior DUI record — the higher the blood-alcohol content and more prior offenses, the stiffer the penalty.

"With all the attention it gives to drunk driving, I think it will help," Phelps said.

Reach Higgins at (803) 771-8570. Staff writers Ishmael Tate and Bill Robinson contributed.