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Drunken driving commonplace in Ohio

By Rick Armon
Beacon Journal staff writer

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Ohio is teeming with convicted drunken drivers.

More than 1.1 million people — about one in every seven

licensed drivers in the state — has at least one conviction for driving while impaired. And 44,789 people have five or more, according to the Ohio Department of Public Safety.

"That's a jaw dropper, isn't it?" agency spokesman Geoff Dutton asked.

The state record of 20 convictions is shared by two people, including former Barberton resident Jess Brown, who is serving a 16-year prison sentence.

The Department of Public Safety provided a breakdown on the number of convictions, which include people from outside the state being caught here, at the request of the Beacon Journal.

"Certainly, impaired driving continues to be a problem here in the state of Ohio," State Highway Patrol Lt. Anne Ralston said. "We continue to urge motorists to make better decisions and plan ahead."

Many people apparently are heeding that advice.

Misdemeanor arrests for driving while impaired have fallen nearly 20 percent statewide over the past five years, according to the Ohio Supreme Court, which tracks new case filings.

In 2006, there were 72,475 misdemeanor cases for impaired driving filed, compared with 58,279 last year. The filings, which don't include felony cases or represent actual convictions, declined each year over that time period.

Drunken driving becomes a felony with the fourth arrest in six years or sixth arrest in 20 years.

Authorities offered several theories why numbers are declining, ranging from Ohio having fewer officers on patrol because of budget cuts to massive, nationwide educational campaigns warning people about the dangers of drinking and driving.

"We've been talking about and been aware of impaired driving for a long time," Ralston said. "The message hasn't changed."

Holmes County led the state with a 67 percent decline.

Among the state's six largest counties, Lucas (Toledo) had the biggest drop at 27 percent; Franklin (Columbus) had the smallest at 1.6 percent. Summit saw misdemeanor drunken-driving arrests fall 8.9 percent. Only four of the state's 88 counties saw an increase: Madison (14 percent), Defiance (4 percent), Wayne (3 percent) and Noble (1.6 percent).

The statewide decline might be short-lived, though. Through June — the latest statistics available for this year — the state was on pace to match or exceed the number of misdemeanor arrests from 2010.

The highway patrol had issued about 1,500 more drunken-driving citations this year through Dec. 27. Overall, the patrol had made about 23,400 such arrests — about 65 a day.

Ralston cited increased enforcement, including doubling the number of drunken-driving checkpoints this year, as the reason. About 35 to 40 percent of traffic fatalities involve impaired driving, she said.

"We believe in Ohio if we can reduce the number of people becoming involved in OVI [operating a vehicle under the influence] crashes, we're going to save lives,"

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Ralston said.






New Year's Eve no longer is considered a prime time for drunken driving, possibly because of educational campaigns and more people taking part in parties that include a hotel stay, officials said.

For example, there were 33 New Year's Eve drunken-driving arrests in Summit County in 2009 compared with 22 last year, said sheriff's Lt. Mike Sanchez, who heads the county's impaired driving task force.

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