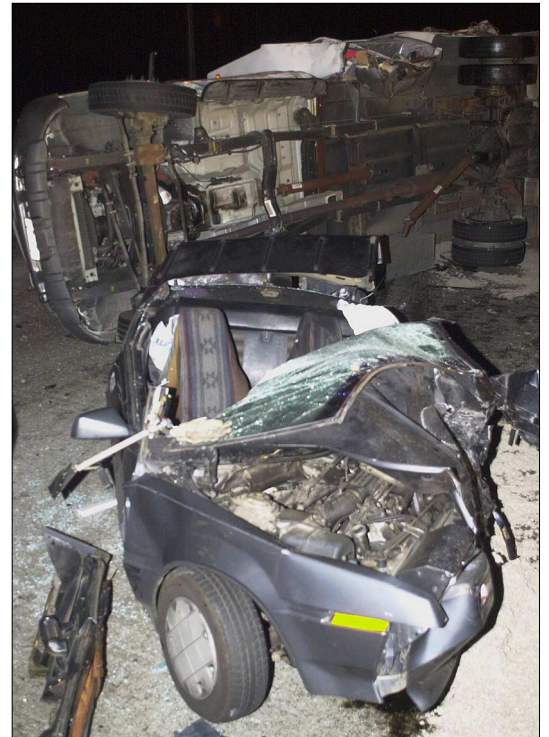


Teen Driving

Should states impose tougher restrictions?

More teenage drivers are involved in car crashes every year — and more are killed — than any other age group. And the number of deaths is rising, even though overall fatalities of teen drivers and passengers have decreased substantially in the last 25 years. Still, some 6,000 teens die in accidents annually — more than 15 a day. Teens are the least likely age group to use seat belts and the most likely to drink and drive. Moreover, the presence of teenage passengers strongly increases the risk that a teen driver will crash, as does driving at night or on weekends. Graduated driver licensing programs have helped bring down teen crash statistics in many states, but safety experts and advocates say more needs to be done, including imposing tougher limits on teen driving. Some say driver education programs are ineffective; others argue that state laws need to be better enforced. Almost all agree, however, that parents need to be more involved in training and monitoring teenagers behind the wheel.



More than 3,600 teen drivers were killed in fatal accidents in the United States in 2003.

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RECIPIENT OF SOCIETY OF PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISTS AWARD FOR EXCELLENCE ♦ AMERICAN BAR ASSOCIATION SILVER GAVEL AWARD

Teen Driving

BY WILLIAM TRIPLETT

THE ISSUES

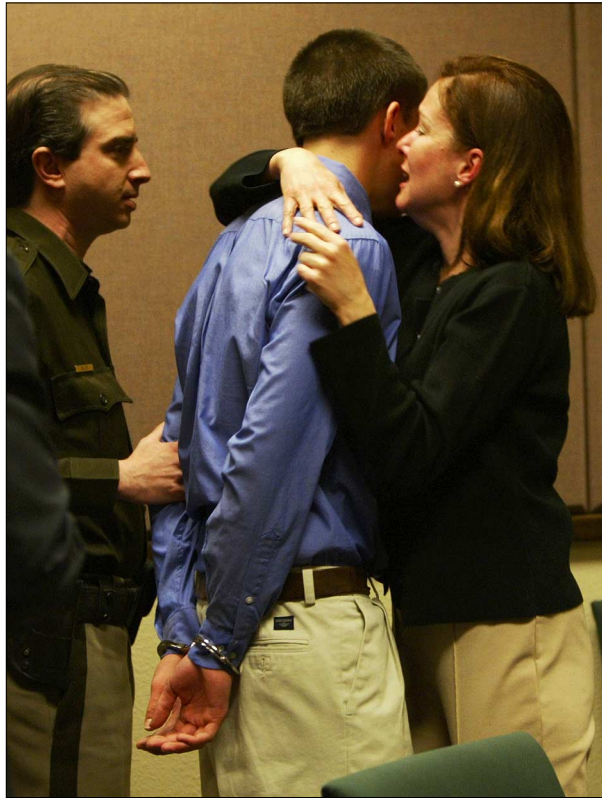
Police estimated that 16-year-old Lauren Sausville was driving nearly 60 miles per hour in a 35-mph zone in early December 2004 when her Ford Explorer ran off the road. The junior at Fairfax High School in Virginia overcompensated with a sharp turn that flipped the sport-utility vehicle (SUV) on its side, sending it careening into a car waiting at a stop sign.¹

That car belonged to the friend she had been following, a 17-year-old boy who police said was legally drunk. He was not hurt, but Lauren was pronounced dead at the scene. Earlier, police said, she had persuaded a stranger at a convenience store to buy two six-packs of beer for her and her friends.

Another recent SUV accident in Virginia involved seven members of the women's crew team at T. C. Williams High School in Alexandria. They were traveling on I-95 near Springfield when the 17-year-old driver lost control of her Cadillac SUV and rolled. All survived except senior Laura Lynam.²

But no one survived when Weston Griggs, 17, drove his Volkswagen Jetta 70 mph in a 40-mph zone in Woodbridge, Va., shortly before 4 a.m. one October morning. He lost control and smashed into a telephone pole — snapping it into three pieces. Griggs and both his passengers, young men 18 and 22, were killed.³

Those were just a few of the recent accidents in suburban Virginia involving teenagers. In the last three months of 2004, at least 17 youths died in crashes in the Washington, D.C., area.



AP Photo/Joe Cavaretta

Sean Larimer, 16, of Las Vegas — who killed his three best friends when he crashed while driving drunk — is comforted by his mother after a court hearing on Jan. 5, 2004. He pleaded guilty to reckless and drunken driving and was sentenced to two years in a juvenile facility.

Teen drivers are involved in more crashes than any other age group; deaths of drivers 15-20 years old have increased 13 percent since 1993.

Some had been drinking and driving; some made fatal rookie mistakes; and some were just along for the ride.

Accidents involving teenagers are disproportionately high throughout the United States. Drivers between ages 15 and 20 make up about only 6.4 percent of the nation's driving population, but for the last 10 years they have been involved in approximately 14 percent of all fatal car crashes.⁴

In 2003, nearly 7,900 teen drivers were involved in fatal accidents in the United States. Nearly half of them died, but most of the victims were passengers, drivers or passengers of other vehicles, or pedestrians. Another 308,000 teen drivers were injured

in fatal crashes. About 6,000 teens died in automobile accidents in 2003, including 3,657 young drivers.⁵

Although those figures were down from the year before — when 3,838 teen drivers were killed — the trend over the last decade has been upward. Since 1993, deaths of drivers 15-20 years old have increased 13 percent.⁶ Indeed, says Kristen Kreibich-Staruch, manager of safety programs and communications at DaimlerChrysler Corp., “traffic crashes are the leading cause of death” for teens of driving age. According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS), motor vehicle crashes account for about 40 percent of adolescent fatalities.⁷

Moreover, teenage drivers are involved in more crashes — fatal and non-fatal — than any other age group. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that in 2002 the motor vehicle death rate for teens (drivers as well as passengers) between ages 15 and 19 was 27.6 deaths per 100,000 population compared to 17.8 for people between 25 and 34 and 15.8 for those between 35 and 44.⁸

Jeffrey W. Runge, a physician who heads the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA), has described teen driving deaths in the United States as “an epidemic.”⁹

Experts cite many reasons for the high toll. Driver education courses are being offered in only about half the nation's public high schools, many discontinued because of skyrocketing insurance costs. And even when courses are offered, they generally focus on helping students pass a driving test, not teaching them to drive defensively and

safely, experts say. Commercial driving school programs have the same problem, they add, although driver education teachers — both public and private — disagree.

The mythical “invulnerability” of youth is also blamed: Teens by nature are risk-takers who rarely think about disaster, particularly when it comes to driving. For example, they are the least likely age group to use seat belts, and the most likely to drink and drive.

The CDC reports that 29 percent of teen drivers killed in auto crashes in 2002 had been drinking, and 77 percent were not wearing seat belts. Moreover, during the period from 1991 to 1997, more than one in three teens reported riding with a driver who had been drinking. And one in six admitted to drinking and driving.¹⁰

“Research continues to show that young drivers between 15 and 20 years of age are more often involved in alcohol-related crashes than any other comparable age group,” says Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD).¹¹

But there has been progress. The number of 15-to-20-year-olds involved in fatal crashes who had a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) higher than 0.08 g/210 liters of breath — the legal limit in most states — dropped 6 percent between 1993 and 2003, possibly due to the increased use of designated drivers.¹²

Nevertheless, teens tend to think of themselves as safe drivers.¹³ Among 10 teens attending a recent class at the Northern Virginia Driving School in Arlington, Va., at least four had close friends who had been in serious accidents, but none thought the same could happen to them.

When asked why he drove fast, a student replied: “It’s just the thrill of it, going fast!”

Some experts say that just because teens are allowed to drive at 16 (or even younger) does not necessarily mean they have the maturity to handle the physical or psychological chal-

Most States Use Graduated Licenses

Most states and the District of Columbia limit teenagers’ driving privileges by instituting graduated driver licensing (GDL) programs, which usually involve a learner’s stage and an intermediate stage before an unrestricted license is permitted. GDL programs substantially reduce teen crash rates. Ohio, for example, reported that following its 1999 implementation of GDL laws, fatal crashes involving 16- and 17-year-old drivers dropped by 70 percent.

Types of Limits on Teen Licenses

States	Learner’s Permits		Intermediate Permits	
	Adult supervision for six months	30-50 hours of adult supervision	No unsupervised night driving	Limits on teenage passengers
Alabama	x			
Alaska	x	x		x
Arizona				
Arkansas	x			
California	x	x		x
Colorado	x	x		
Connecticut				x
Delaware	x		x	
Dist. of Columbia	x	x		x
Florida	x	x		
Georgia	x			x
Hawaii				
Idaho		x	x	
Illinois				x

Continued →

Learner’s Stage — Drivers must be supervised by adult driver for six months and must remain conviction-free during that period. In some cases, 30-50 hours of supervised driving with an adult driver are required.

Intermediate Stage — *Nighttime restrictions:* Unsupervised driving from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. is prohibited. *Passenger restrictions:* Usually limit the number of teenage passengers without adult supervision; the optimal limit is one teenage passenger.

Source: Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, “State Highway Safety Law Chart,” October 2004

lenges of driving, especially when egged on by their friends. For instance, a 16-year-old girl described as a model student and daughter died in a crash while playing “road-hog” with a friend in another car.¹⁴

Inexperience is another factor: New drivers simply aren’t aware of the many unexpected conditions they might confront, and they know even less about how to deal with them.

“They’re always either understeering

Types of Limits on Teen Licenses				
States	Learner's Permits		Intermediate Permits	
	Adult supervision for six months	30-50 hours of adult supervision	No unsupervised night driving	Limits on teenage passengers
Illinois				x
Indiana				x
Iowa	x			
Kansas		x		
Kentucky	x			
Louisiana	x			
Maine	x	x		x
Maryland		x		
Massachusetts	x			x
Michigan	x	x		
Minnesota	x	x		
Mississippi	x		x	
Missouri	x			
Montana				
Nebraska				
Nevada		x		x
New Hampshire				x
New Jersey	x			x
New Mexico	x	x		x
New York			x	
North Carolina	x		x	x
North Dakota	x			
Ohio	x	x		
Oklahoma	x			
Oregon	x	x		x
Pennsylvania	x	x		
Rhode Island	x	x		
South Carolina	x	x	x	
South Dakota			x	
Tennessee	x	x		x
Texas	x			x
Utah		x		x
Vermont	x	x		x
Virginia	x	x		x
Washington	x	x		x
West Virginia	x			
Wisconsin	x	x		x
Wyoming				

or oversteering, going off the road or hitting the curb, or turning too soon or too late,” says Virginia driving school owner Larry Blake. “I’ve fought in two wars, and I can tell you, this is the most dangerous profession there is.”

As Allan F. Williams, chief scientist for the IIHS, has put it, “You’ve got several things going on here — a risky driving style; inability to recognize or respond to dangerous driving situations and overconfidence in

their abilities. When you put all those things together, you’ve got a pretty lethal combination.”¹⁵

Some 45 states and the District of Columbia have responded to the problem by instituting graduated driver licensing (GDL) programs, which limit a new driver’s privileges pending successful completion of phases involving increasing levels of risk exposure.

The Journal of Safety Research recently reported that GDL programs have helped reduce teen crash rates, but because of differences in state programs and evaluation methods, precise nationwide measures cannot be made.¹⁶ And states don’t enforce all parts of their GDL programs equally, making them less effective than they could be, advocates say.

But one factor clearly appears to help: raising the legal driving age. In England, where drivers must be age 17, and in Germany, where the age is 18, teens have lower fatality rates than in the United States.¹⁷

Some experts say more educational programs are needed; others contend they have little impact on teens. And still others argue for more parental involvement in teens’ driving lessons. But a recent study by Liberty Mutual Insurance Co. and Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD) indicated that more parental involvement actually can have a negative effect.¹⁸

Meanwhile, an upcoming explosion in the number of teenagers is putting new pressure on safety experts to improve teen driving. Reflecting a nationwide trend, the California Office of Traffic Safety recently released a study forecasting a one-third rise in the state’s teen population by 2007. The increase will occur because the teenage children of Baby Boomers — who delayed having children to pursue careers — are reaching puberty.¹⁹

“Teenage traffic deaths could skyrocket over the next decade,” California officials said.²⁰

Fatalities Caused by Young Drivers

A majority (58 percent) of the people killed in crashes involving young drivers were not the young drivers but passengers, occupants of other vehicles and pedestrians.

Fatalities in Crashes Involving Drivers Ages 15-20

Year	Young drivers	Passengers of young drivers	Occupants of other vehicles	Non-occupants	Total fatalities
1999	3,564	2,578	2,245	752	9,139
2000	3,621	2,535	2,185	756	9,097
2001	3,617	2,529	2,172	746	9,064
2002	3,838	2,565	2,153	695	9,251
2003	3,657	2,384	1,979	646	8,666

Source: "Crash Stats," National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, November 2004

As parents, school officials and safety experts seek ways to better protect teen drivers, here are some of the key questions under debate:

Is driver education effective?

For many teens and parents, the value of driver education — behind-the-wheel experience bolstered by classroom instruction — seems self-evident.

However, some experts say formal evaluations of high school "driver ed" programs show they have little or no effect in reducing crashes.²¹

"Driver education programs are usually short-term, and only basic skills are learned," says Williams, of the IIHS. "There's not enough time to do more. To think this short-term course is going to make young people safe drivers is kind of unrealistic."

Having studied teen crash rates for 25 years, Williams concluded in a 2004 report: "There is no difference in the crash records of driver education graduates compared with equivalent groups of beginners who learned to drive without formal education."²²

NHTSA Administrator Runge essentially concurs. "As it's currently configured, driver's education might make a difference in the first six months of driving," he said, "but after that, it doesn't matter much."²³

Eric Skrum, communications director for the National Motorists Association (NMA), argues that current driver education programs don't put enough emphasis on behind-the-wheel experience. "Instead of telling kids about a skid, you need to get them into a skid," Skrum says. "Teach them how to handle the situation. The few hours that new drivers have now isn't training them for all situations they're going to be in."

While critics acknowledge that high school programs can teach good driving skills, they say the programs have little or no effect on teen attitudes. Indeed, the IIHS maintains that teenagers who have accidents are the least susceptible to behavior change through education.

Studies involving mostly young males have noted the "interrelationship among certain personality traits (rebelliousness, risk-taking, independence, defiance of authority), deviant driving prac-

tices (speeding, driving while impaired) and crashes and violations," the IIHS says. "The traits, values and peer associations of this high-risk group are such that changing their behavior through education is a difficult task."²⁴

That is the very point that critics fail to understand, according to certified driving instructor Syed Ahmad, of Alexandria, Va. "When accidents happen, they always blame the driver's-ed classes," Ahmad says. "But the fact is, if your intention is to go out and party when you get your license, you're not going to make it."

Allen Robinson, chief executive officer of the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association (ADTSEA), says critics of driver education rely heavily — and inappropriately — on a 1974 study in DeKalb County (Macon), Ga. "When we planned the DeKalb study, we were too ambitious," he says. "We said we could reduce fatalities of 16-year-old drivers by 10 percent [through driver's education]. But we only achieved about a 4 percent reduction. So, it was unsuccessful in that respect. But today there isn't a single countermeasure — seat belts or anything — that can show a 4 percent reduction in fatalities."

Yet critics continue to cite the DeKalb study, Robinson asserts, "as the benchmark for why driver's education 'doesn't work.'" Indeed, the study is one of the reasons many high schools discontinue their driver education courses.

However, Robinson says the Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) and the Center for Applied Research recently found "significantly lower rates of convictions, suspensions and crashes" for drivers who took a driver ed course versus drivers who learned through 50 hours of informal, supervised driving. An ODOT spokesperson says the report is still in draft form and under review, with no public release date set.

Driving school owner Blake (who says his pupils have included the daughters of former Presidents Richard Nixon

and Gerald Ford), argues that not all schools evaluate students properly. In Virginia, he notes, instructors can waive a student's school road test if they feel the student has performed well during the course. Increasingly, though, commercial instructors are waiving their road tests for financial reasons, he says.

"When students find out an instructor is going to make them take the road test, they tell their friends, and those friends make sure they don't go to that driving school," Blake says. "More and more schools are waiving the road test because they're scared of losing business." If more schools enforced standards more rigorously, he claims, driver ed would be highly effective.

Indeed, some observers blame the lack of uniformity among driver ed curricula, not driver education per se. "It's all very uneven around the country," says Eileen Buckholtz, the mother of two young drivers and the administrator of the Web site teendriving.com, which advocates safe driving.

Stephen Wallace, chairman and chief executive officer of Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD), adds, "There's a range of driver education programs out there, so a differing degree of effectiveness exists."

At a 2003 National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) symposium on driver education, several safety experts argued for uniform, national standards for driver education. But Barbara Harsha, executive director of the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA), thinks that would be a mistake. "The

states get no federal money for driver's education, so there's no way to make them comply with [national] standards." She favors encouraging states to adopt voluntary core requirements and guidelines for driver ed courses.

"Federal driver education standards would be a terrible idea," agrees Radley



Wearing goggles that distort her senses as if she had been drinking, a driver education student tries, unsuccessfully, to walk a straight line — a common police test for drunkenness.

American Automobile Association

Should more limits be imposed on teen drivers?

Graduated driver licensing (GDL) programs — used in some 45 states and the District of Columbia — are the most popular and widely used method of limiting teen driving. GDL programs generally feature three phases: a learner's permit, which allows driving only when supervised by a fully licensed adult; a provisional, or intermediate, license, which allows unsupervised driving under restricted circumstances and, finally, full licensure. The ages for each phase are usually 15, 16 and 17, respectively.

The first two phases require minimum training periods — varying from state to state — before the student can advance.

The theory behind GDL is simple. "By restricting when teenagers may drive, and with whom, graduated driver licensing allows new drivers to gain much-needed, on-the-road experience in controlled, lower-risk settings," according to NHTSA. "It also means that a teenager will be a little older and more mature when he or she gains a full, unrestricted license."²⁵

Balko, a policy analyst at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank. "Every state's driving is a little different — the skills you need to drive in Florida and in Alaska are quite different. States know better what's best for learning how to drive on their highways."

Yet, no one even knows how many states still offer driver's education in public high schools. "We know that about 55 percent of public high schools in the United States still offer it," Robinson of ADTSEA says, "but we don't know how many states."

New Zealand first introduced GDL in 1987, and three subsequent studies of the program showed positive effects.²⁶ In 1996, Florida became the first state to initiate a GDL program, and a subsequent evaluation showed that it substantially reduced teen deaths. So did later evaluations of GDL programs in California, Connecticut, Kentucky, Michigan, North Carolina, Ohio, Maryland and Oregon.²⁷ Ohio, for example, reported that following its 1999 implementation of GDL laws, fatal crashes involving 16- and 17-year-old drivers dropped by 70 percent.²⁸

Youths' Alcohol-related Crashes Declined

The percentage of young drivers involved in fatal car crashes who had been drinking dropped by almost 50 percent in the past two decades. A large majority of the drinkers had a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) above .08 percent, the legal limit in most states.



Source: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

While the collective fatality rates of 15-to-20-year-old drivers and passengers have been rising, statistics for specific ages support the effectiveness of GDL programs. For instance, the overwhelming majority of drivers in GDL programs are either 15 or 16. According to the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics, 491 15-year-olds died in motor vehicle accidents in 2000, but the death toll dropped to 422 in 2001. Motor vehicle deaths of 16-year-olds during the same period decreased from 933 to 908.²⁹

But the next year, 2002, deaths in both age groups began creeping back up — to 479 for 15-year-olds and 1,046 for 16-year-olds.

Harsha of the GHSA suggests the increase was due to lax enforcement. Not all states enforce GDL laws equally, and some of the laws are weak. Harsha's group would like more states with GDL laws to limit nighttime driving and the number of passengers allowed in the vehicle with the teenage driver. "Research shows benefits of these things when they're enforced," she says.

Driving at night is generally more hazardous for all age groups. But for teens it can be especially dangerous. According to the *Journal of Safety Research*, many newly licensed drivers have had less practice driving at night than during the day. "Fatigue — thought to be a problem for teenagers at all times of the day — may be more of a factor at night; and recreational driving that is considered to be high risk, sometimes involving alcohol use, is more likely to take place at night."³⁰

For 16-year-old drivers, the risk of a fatal crash is three times higher after 9 p.m. than during the daytime.³¹ Overall, about 40 percent of teen motor vehicle fatalities occur at night.³²

But most state GDL programs only impose a curfew on teen drivers after midnight or 1 a.m.³³ In any case, teen curfews are hard to enforce at any hour, according to Harsha, because police have little way of knowing whether a young person driving at night is underage.

The presence of teenage passengers also strongly increases crash risk

for teenage drivers. Four studies have confirmed that the risk of an accident increases as more passengers ride with a teenage driver. One study demonstrated that just a single passenger nearly doubled the risk of a fatal crash, and two or more passengers raised the risk to five times that of driving alone.³⁴ Yet 29 states do not limit the number of passengers that can ride with teen drivers.

Surprisingly, parents often oppose imposing more limits on teen passengers. For instance, Maryland state Del. Adrienne A. Mandel has tried for three years to enact legislation that would prohibit teenagers with provisional licenses from carrying any passengers under age 18 except family members. Her attempts have failed each time, she says, mostly because rural families oppose the measure.

"They say more young people will be on the roads if each one has to drive alone," Mandel says. But carpooling could alleviate that, she points out. Parents in rural areas also complain that passenger limitations would be especially inconvenient in those areas where transportation options aren't abundant, Mandel says. "They're talking about inconvenience. I'm talking about saving lives," she says. Parents also opposed earlier curfews for teens because older teens often have jobs and need a way to get to work at night, she points out.

Teens themselves are often divided over limitations on driving, including GDL programs in general. In 1998, when Delaware was considering adopting a GDL system, a teenager unhappy with the idea wrote to the Web site *teenink.com*: "Getting a driver's license means freedom, and most of us can give you the number of years, months and days until that wonderful moment. You get to say good-bye to the yellow school bus, meet your friends or go to work."³⁵

Yet, in early 2004 when South Dakota pushed back its curfew for teen drivers from 8 p.m. to 10 p.m.,

a 16-year-old girl who welcomed the later curfew still admitted that, “when I first started driving, it really scared me being out in the dark.”³⁶

The IIHS advocates earlier curfews and uniform restrictions on teen passengers, and the NTSB says teens should not be allowed to use cell phones while driving.

“Young and inexperienced drivers out late at night with limited practice and with other kids in the car — there are limits for those drivers that clearly make sense,” says Wallace of SADD. “But to some degree, this comes down to education and practice. At some point, they’re all inexperienced — they have to get out there and learn.

“And when they start, those are the ones we have to look out for, because nearly one in five 16-year-old drivers is involved in an accident in their first year.”

Should the driving age be raised?

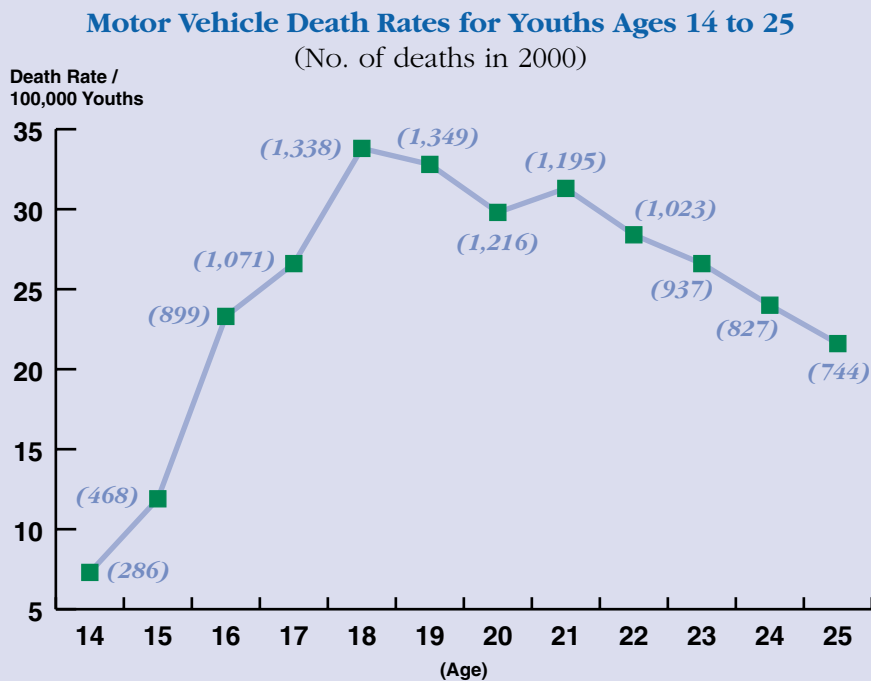
Teen drivers between the ages of 16 and 19 have the highest fatal and non-fatal crash rates in the country, but 16-year-olds are three times more likely to be involved in a crash than 19-year-olds. Every decade, more than 9,000 16-year-olds die in motor vehicle accidents in the United States.

Many safety experts blame the fact that states — including those with graduated driver licensing — grant unsupervised driving privileges at 16, which many safety advocates argue is too soon.

Besides being emotionally and psychologically immature, young, new drivers face other challenges when making decisions and judgments. Susan Scharoun, chairman of the psychology department at Le Moyne College, in Syracuse, N.Y., notes that biological factors influence teenage behavior, particularly when risk-taking is involved. Recent research shows that hormonal activity and incomplete development of the frontal lobe of the brain, which controls reasoning and memory, affect teen risk-taking behavior, according to Scharoun.³⁷

Vehicle Death Rate Highest for 18-Year-Olds

Eighteen-year-olds had the highest vehicle death rate among youths ages 14 to 25 in 2000, closely followed by youths age 19.



Source: Child Trends; www.childtrendsdatabank.org; May 15, 2003

Thus, 16-year-olds’ emotional, psychological and biological immaturity — combined with their inexperience — explain why they have the highest percentages of single-vehicle crashes and crashes involving speeding and driver error, as well as the highest vehicle-occupancy rates, according to the IIHS.

American teenagers are allowed to drive at younger ages than in most other countries. In Northern Europe, for instance, the minimum age for a beginning driver is typically 18; in England, it’s 17. By contrast, an adolescent in Michigan can obtain a learner’s permit at 14 years and nine months.

But the high crash rates of U.S. teenagers lead many — like Syracuse, N.Y., high school driver education instructor Ed Bregande — to recommend that states raise their minimum driving

ages. He thinks learner’s permits should not be issued to anyone younger than 17.

“You hear talk of raising the age now and then,” says Williams of the IIHS. “But the political reality is that whenever it has come up, it never goes anywhere.”

“I think 16 certainly is too young to drive,” concurs Harsha of the Governors Highway Safety Association. “But it’s very difficult politically, especially in farm states, to raise the age. There’s not enough public or political support yet for increasing the age. Possibly in the future.”

Parents are often the biggest obstacle to raising the driving age. As one mother has put it, “When they get their license and they can drive themselves to practice and then drive home, for me, it was great.”³⁸

TEEN DRIVING

Williams explains that parents face a dilemma: They want their kids to start driving as soon as possible so the parents don't have to chauffeur them around anymore. "But they also know it's dangerous for kids to drive," he says.

Teens are predictable on the issue. Asked if the minimum driving age should be raised to help reduce teen accident and fatality rates, a 16-year-old student at Northern Virginia Driving School answers for the entire class when he says, "Sure, right after they give me my license."

Others argue for raising the driving age because young minds are supposedly easily influenced by media images of speed. Last summer, for example, several highway and auto safety groups demanded that General Motors (GM) stop running a TV commercial during the Olympics that showed what appeared to be a 10-year-old boy — barely able to see over the steering wheel of a Corvette — driving wildly through a city. A voiceover in the ad called it "the official car of your dreams."

In a letter to GM Chairman G. Richard Wagoner, the groups wrote, "This ad is certainly among the most dangerous, anti-safety messages to be aired on national television in recent years. . . . Ads glorifying speed and high performance are common enough these days, but this is one of the . . . most reprehensible. Auto-industry ads promoting these illegal behaviors, especially in sports and other muscle-type cars, are suspect because they target young people, and this ad unabashedly sinks to a new low."

GM pulled the ad after receiving the complaint.

Some have argued that certain video games — like "Grand Theft Auto," which features reckless driving — have a similar negative influence on younger teens.

But Buckholtz of teendriving.com says, "I haven't seen any indicators that

merous driving hazards and emergencies in virtual reality.

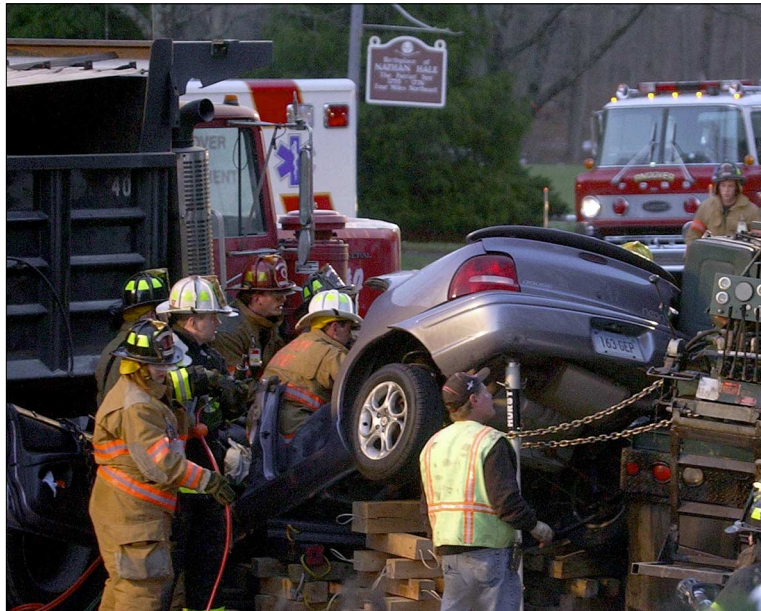
"We've had over 3 million Web hits and 1.5 million game plays," says DaimlerChrysler's Kreibich-Staruch. "We're capturing kids' attention on average for 16 minutes."

More than 90 percent of teens who played the game said it made them more aware of risks they hadn't realized, and 60 percent said they would be more careful driving as a result, according to a University of Michigan study.³⁹

"Whether that 60 percent has actually been more careful, we don't know," Kreibich-Staruch says. But agreeing that it's "impractical," as she puts it, to raise the driving age when so many parents want their teens to start driving as soon as possible, the key is more parental involvement in the early stages of driving, she says.

"Parents simply don't understand the risks," she says. "Even when they

raise their awareness, which is good, parents don't think it'll happen to their kids. We had the father of a 16-year-old girl who'd had her license for three months and already had been in two crashes, and he still didn't think she was a bad driver." ■



AP Photo/Jim Michaud

It took rescue workers more than an hour to extricate a teenage driver from her car after it became wedged between two large trucks near Andover, Conn., on Nov. 15, 2004. Nearly 20 percent of 16-year-old drivers are involved in accidents in their first year of driving.

video games have that effect." Instead of raising the minimum driving age, she advocates a balance between needs and statistical reality. "A lot of kids at 16 and 17 have part-time jobs and need to go to activities. But that needs to be tempered by really good rules."

Teendriving.com recommends that teens be forbidden from carrying other teenagers as passengers for the first full year after obtaining a license.

"Road Ready StreetWise" is a new video game thought to be having a positive influence on teen driving behavior. It is sponsored by Road-ReadyTeens.org — a joint venture of DaimlerChrysler, AAA, National Safety Council, MADD, Hewlett Packard, WildTangent and Yahoo! Autos. The video allows teens to experience nu-

BACKGROUND

The Teen Brain

Young people between ages 15 and 19 are three times more likely to die from all causes — primarily

Continued on p. 12

Chronology

1900s-1940s

Automobiles become cheaper due to mass production.

1924

Henry Ford perfects the assembly line, making the Ford Model T the first successfully mass-marketed car.

1929

National car sales reach 27 million.

1950s ***Postwar economic boom creates generation of teenagers who can afford cars. Rise of rock 'n' roll music both celebrates and fuels the growth of teen car culture.***

1955

In the movie "Rebel Without a Cause," hot cars and motorcycles symbolize youthful defiance.

1960s ***Advocates and researchers begin to make automobile safety a national issue.***

1965

In his book *Unsafe at Any Speed*, consumer advocate Ralph Nader accuses U.S. automakers of marketing vehicles they know to be unsafe.

1966

President Lyndon Johnson signs National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act and Highway Safety Act.

1970s ***Disturbing trends begin to emerge after federal gov-***

ernment begins collecting detailed data on motor vehicle accidents.

1970

National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (NHTSA) is established in the U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT).

1974

A study of driver education in DeKalb County (Macon), Ga., casts doubt on its effectiveness in preventing teen accidents.

1975

The DOT's Fatality Analysis Reporting System — in its first annual report on vehicle deaths by age group — reveals that more than 8,700 teenagers died on the nation's roads that year.

1978

The number of teens dying in car crashes peaks at 9,940.

1980s ***Federal government tries to stop teen drinking-and-driving; teen motor vehicle deaths decline.***

1984

Congress passes National Minimum Drinking Age Act, setting 21 as the federal limit for drinking.

1990s ***State governments search for ways to decrease the number of teen motor vehicle deaths. Many high schools stop offering driver education because of rising insurance costs and doubts about its effectiveness.***

1996

Florida becomes the first state to institute a graduated driver licensing (GDL) program. The following year, state authorities report a 9 percent reduction in fatal crashes among 15-to-17-year-olds.

1999

After starting GDL programs, Michigan reports a 25 percent reduction and North Carolina a 27 percent reduction in fatal crashes among 16-year-olds.

2000s-Present

Approximately 6,000 teens still die every year in motor vehicle accidents.

October 2000

Congress establishes a .08 blood alcohol concentration as the national threshold for drunken driving and gives states four years to adopt it.

2004

Advocates and experts praise the increasing number of states with GDL programs but lobby for more restrictions on teen nighttime driving and the number of adolescent passengers a teen driver can carry.

August 2004

Liberty Mutual Insurance Co. and Students Against Destructive Decisions issue a report suggesting that teenagers learn some of their worst driving behaviors from their parents.

Fall 2004

At least 17 young people are killed on Washington, D.C.-area roads, one of the worst streaks of teen driving fatalities in the nation's history.

Teen Drivers and Alcohol: A Deadly Mixture

When I was in my 20s, I thought Jimmy had merely been unlucky, which he was. When I was in my 30s, I thought Jimmy had been foolish to drive after drinking, which he was. But when I was in my 40s, I realized that Jimmy had been misled by all of us — the alcohol industry, the fraternity culture, and we, his friends — to think that being young and having fun means drinking alcohol.”

— **William DeJong, MADD Victim's Tribute** ¹

William DeJong was a typical teenager with few worries and little sense of his own mortality. All that changed when his 19-year-old friend, Jimmy, died in an accident after driving drunk in Texas in 1971. Now a professor at Boston University, DeJong has spent his life researching student alcohol use for the Center for Alcohol and Drug Prevention and Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD).

“At first, I wasn’t conscious that I was drawn to my work because of my friend,” DeJong says. “But I think about him every time I hear about a student that dies from drunk driving.”

The legal drinking age throughout the United States was raised to 21 in 1984, too late to have an impact on DeJong’s friend. The number of alcohol-impaired teenage drivers involved in fatal crashes declined by 61 percent between 1982 and 1998, largely due to the law, but the decline has stalled in recent years. ²

Alcohol is still a factor in nearly a third of all fatal crashes involving 15-to-20-year-old drivers, and that number is holding steady, says MADD President Wendy Hamilton. Alcohol is still a major contributor to the deaths of 15 teenagers a day from automobile accidents. ³

Education and increased enforcement of underage drinking laws are key weapons in the fight to save teenagers’ lives.

“The minimum-drinking-age law saves 900 teen lives each year, but if the law were better enforced, we know we’d save even more kids,” Hamilton says, citing loopholes in some states that limit the prosecution of teens for purchasing, attempting to purchase or possessing alcohol and the apparent ease of acquiring alcohol by teens in many communities. For example, 14 states — Alaska, Arkansas, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Louisiana,

Maine, Maryland, Mississippi, Nevada, New York, South Carolina and Vermont — do not prohibit attempts to purchase alcohol by those under 21 as long as they do not use fake identification. ⁴

While the minimum-drinking-age law has helped reduce teen auto deaths due to drunken driving, it has not reduced teen alcohol use. Approximately 80 percent of students say they have consumed alcohol by the end of high school, and two-thirds of high school seniors report having been drunk, according to Students Against Destructive Decisions (SADD). And illegal alcohol use is all the more dangerous because it must be hidden, so underage drinkers often drink in vehicles or secluded areas, increasing the chances for drunken driving. ⁵

Teens who drink and drive are more likely to participate in other dangerous driving behaviors, like driving too fast for the weather or traffic conditions and not wearing seat belts. Of the teen drivers who died in alcohol-related crashes in 2003, 74 percent were not wearing seat belts. ⁶

Partly due to their inexperience and risk-taking behavior, young drivers make up 14 percent of all drivers drunk or sober involved in fatal crashes — even though they represent less than 7 percent of all licensed drivers. ⁷

While parents often look to legislators, law enforcement and the community for answers, those groups continually cite parents’ involvement as the best solution.

“Parents can have a substantial impact if they are willing to set boundaries,” says Lucille Bauer, a public information officer for the police department in Montgomery County (Bethesda), Md., where more than a dozen fatal car accidents involving teens occurred in 2004. “Despite what they say, young people want limits, but unfortunately too many parents are afraid to set them. The police department wants to support parents in setting boundaries. We’d much prefer to prevent fatal collisions than to investigate them.”

MADD’s Hamilton agrees parents need outside support to protect their children. “Teens are getting mixed messages from the community, the entertainment industry and the alcohol industry,” Hamilton says. “As a country, we’ve got to start talking about this. We need to change the perception that drinking is

Continued from p. 10

auto accidents, followed by homicide, suicide and drugs — than children ages 10 to 14.

Until recently, neuroscientists believed judgment-impairing surges of hormones in the later teen years were responsible for this difference. ⁴⁰ Scientists had long known that neural connections form astonishingly quickly between birth and age 3, and that by age 6 the brain has already developed

95 percent of its adult structure. But new research shows that the human brain undergoes another period of major development between the onset of adolescence and roughly age 21.

“The biggest changes are occurring in the brain’s prefrontal cortex, located right behind the forehead, which governs ‘executive’ thinking: our ability to use logic, make sound decisions and size up potential risks,” the journal *Prevention* recently reported.

The findings explain a lot about teen behavior and risk taking — particularly when driving is involved. “Knowing that this decision-making area is still under construction explains plenty about teens,” the article continued. “Researchers have found that even among youths who generally show good judgment, the quality of decision-making fizzles in moments of high arousal. Emotion, whether happiness, anger or jealousy — particu-

a rite of passage, that every teenager is doing it. There are kids who don't drink."

But since statistics show that a large majority of teenagers will try alcohol well before leaving high school, many police departments try to inform young drivers about the serious consequences of mixing alcohol and driving.

Bauer's department recently introduced a program in which high school students drive a John Deere utility vehicle through an obstacle course while wearing special goggles that simulate the vision and balance of someone who is legally drunk.

"The students quickly realize how difficult it is to drive in an impaired state; it really seems to make an impact," Bauer says.

MADD, SADD, law enforcement and advocacy groups sponsor a host of other education programs targeting teens, but for the most part, their success rates are unknown.

Some advocates also suggest systemic changes, including graduated driver's licenses, driving curfews and crackdowns on selling or providing alcohol to teens. Bauer says adult prosecution is harder because some parents let their teenagers drink at home, thinking they are protecting their children by taking away their car keys. Bauer's department has a program, entitled "Parents Who Host Lose the Most," which reminds parents of the consequences of providing alcohol to minors: citations and fines for parents and physical harm for their children.

"The safest thing for parents is to not support any kind of alcohol use for their children because we know that besides drunk driving, it can lead to unwanted, unprotected sex; dangerous burns and falls and alcohol poisoning," Hamilton says.

Parents may not have convinced their kids to abstain from all alcohol, but they have generally succeeded in relating to their teens the concept that if they do drink when partying with their friends, they should choose "designated drivers" who will remain sober. American attitudes about drinking and driving shifted dramatically in the late 1980s, following a major publicity campaign by the Harvard Alcohol Project, which convinced U.S. adults that driving after drinking was irresponsible. Since the designated-driver campaign began in 1988, drunken driving deaths on U.S. roads dropped from 23,626 in 1988 to 16,580 in 1994.⁸

But according to a study conducted by DeJong, rather than completely abstaining from alcohol, teenage designated drivers often tend to be the group member who has consumed the least amount of alcohol or considers himself the least drunk. The study found that 40 percent of all designated drivers on college campuses — where most students are still underage — drink at least one alcoholic beverage before driving and more than 10 percent said they consumed five or more drinks and still drove home as the designated driver.⁹

Parents, however, can still have a substantial impact on their children's drinking and driving behaviors, according to a study by SADD and Liberty Mutual Insurance Co. The study found that parents who actively discourage their children from drinking are much more likely to raise substance-free teenagers. It also found that when parents talk to their kids about drinking, instances of drinking and driving decreased from 18 percent to 8 percent.¹⁰

"When parents commit to communicating with their children about this important issue, behaviors can change and lives can be saved," Liberty Mutual Executive Vice President John B. Connors said.¹¹

— *Kate Templin*

¹ Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), www.madd.org

² *Ibid.*

³ National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), www.nhtsa.dot.gov

⁴ MADD, *op. cit.*

⁵ National Commission Against Drunk Driving, www.ncadd.com

⁶ NHTSA, *op. cit.*

⁷ "Traffic Safety Facts 2003: Young Drivers," National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, www.nrd.nhtsa.dot.gov/pdf/nrd-30/NCSA/TSF2003/809774.pdf

⁸ <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/chc/alcohol.html>

⁹ William DeJong and Jay Winsten, "The Use of Designated Drivers by U.S. College Students," The Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Other Drug Prevention, www.edc.org/hec/pubs/articles/des-drivers.pdf

¹⁰ "Teens Today," SADD and Liberty Mutual Insurance Co., www.saddonline.com

¹¹ Liberty Mutual, www.libertymutual.com/personal/teen/2001_pressrelease.html

larly when teens are with their peers — overrides logic, making even the smart ones momentarily dumb."⁴¹

Researchers now believe the phenomenon helps explain teen behavior that seems to make no sense, such as when a good student who normally respects parents' rules ends up playing a fatal game of chicken on a dark road. Teasing by peers about being afraid, for instance, can temporarily short-circuit a teen's otherwise hard-

wired knowledge about what's wisely safe or stupidly dangerous.

Yet despite the wealth of statistics showing the frequency with which teens crash and the obvious roles that inexperience and immaturity play, little research exists on specific reasons why teen motor vehicle accidents occur. Bella Dinh-Zarr, director of traffic safety policy for AAA, told the House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure in 2002 that data on crash causation

for all age groups were at least 25 years old. Worse, the majority of the data focuses on factors relating to prevention of future injuries rather than crashes.⁴²

The lack of data was most acute regarding teen drivers. While graduated driver licensing had been helping to reduce teen crashes, Dinh-Zarr said, more information is needed because teen crash rates remain disproportionately high. "Very little is known about the teenage driver," she said. "By tar-

Some Cities Legalize Drag Racing

At Indianapolis Raceway Park, they call it “Midnight Madness.” At Las Vegas Motor Speedway, it’s “Midnight Mayhem.” And at San Diego’s Qualcomm Stadium, former home diamond of the Padres, it’s simply “RaceLegal.”

But in each venue the story’s the same: Young men and women, mostly teenagers, competing in drag races to the cheers of friends and fans as police officers watch — or compete along with the kids.

Illegal drag racing has existed almost as long as automobiles. But ever since Hollywood began making movies about dragsters in the 1950s, fast cars have become a foundation of youth culture — spurring teens to see just how fast a car can go and striking fear in the hearts of parents and authorities.

Although no statistics exist detailing the extent and scope of illegal street racing in America, *The New York Times* recently reported that law enforcement officials across the country say “it has become a serious problem.”¹ Some authorities believe the popularity of two recent drag-racing movies — “The Fast and the Furious” in 2001, and its 2003 sequel, “2 Fast 2 Furious” — are at least partly responsible. For instance, in 1999 the Florida Department of Highway Safety and Motor Vehicles recorded 28 illegal street-racing accidents; by 2003 the number had climbed to 82.²

In recent years, some cities have begun channeling the racers off the public streets and into controlled environments. San Diego began suffering “an epidemic” of street racing in the late 1990s, said Stephen Bender, an epidemiologist and professor emeritus in the graduate school of public health at San Diego State University.³ On any weekend night Bender said, more than 1,000 cars and 4,000 spectators would be involved in drag racing in the San Diego area.⁴ In 2002, 16 teenagers were killed and another 31 injured in the illegal contests.⁵

With funding from the California Office of Traffic Safety, Bender started RaceLegal in 1998 as part of a university program at San Diego State. Competitors would have to wear helmets and submit their cars to a safety inspection prior to racing on a four-lane, eighth-mile (regulation length) strip inside Qualcomm Stadium. Drivers paid a \$20 entry fee, spectators \$5.

At first, drag racers tended to avoid RaceLegal — why pay for something they could keep doing on city streets for free? The San Diego government responded by ratcheting up fines and penalties for illegal racing and then formed a special undercover police unit to enforce the new provisions. First infractions won racers a trip to jail in handcuffs, loss of vehicle for 30 days, \$2,500 in fines and two points on their driver’s li-

getting research to find better information about the cause of crashes — before, during, and immediately after they occur — we can design better interventions to protect young drivers.”⁴³

Further research into brain-development stages in late adolescence could help shed light on specific causes of crashes.

Car Culture

The most powerful influence on teenagers’ relationships with cars has been American pop culture, which has always viewed cars as more than merely a means of transportation. When they first appeared, automobiles were expensive, putting them out of the reach of the average American. A car was a symbol of riches and fame.

That began to change with the advent of the first mass-produced automobile — the Ford Model T. During

the first two decades of the 20th century, Henry Ford perfected the use of the assembly line and quickly brought the price of a car to within reach of almost any working family. By 1924, a Model T cost \$290.

The American economy began to surge in the 1920s, and cars became the main symbol of growth. From 1916 to 1929, U.S. annual car sales tripled from 9 million to 27 million.⁴⁴ The American car culture was born.

The postwar boom of the 1950s spawned the teen car culture. As the economy once again surged — offering plenty of part-time jobs to students — teenagers could afford used cars of their own. And they made them a reflection of themselves.

“The ability to tune and soup-up muscle cars gave average Joes the opportunity to show off their power, their speed and their style in a way that personified the car as character,” notes a history of the period.⁴⁵

Hollywood added another layer of meaning: Movies like “Rebel Without a Cause” (1955) made dragsters and motorcycles a form of anti-establishment defiance for alienated youth. The film’s wild popularity among teenagers spawned imitators like “Hot Rod Girl” (1956), “Hot Rod Rumble” (1957) and “Dragstrip Girl” (1957).

Such movies typically played at drive-in theaters, which made cars symbolically important — as the place where teen dating often began.

Driving was, in a word, cool. As a man in his 60s who fondly remembers those days has put it, “Between 1957 and 1959, my friends and I learned all the rituals that young boys needed to know concerning driving. We learned how important it was to be noticed behind the wheel of a fast car or with someone who had one. It was a time in our lives that we had looked forward to, having seen those slightly older than us doing the same things.”⁴⁶

censes, which also were suspended for a full year. A second infraction caused complete forfeiture of vehicle and longer jail time. Spectators were fined \$1,000.⁶

Street racers and their fans started to see the economic sense of going to RaceLegal. In 2001, San Diego prosecutors filed 290 illegal racing cases; in 2002 they filed 155, and in 2003 they filed only 60. Most important, Lydia DeNecochea, program director of RaceLegal, says that in 2004, only six illegal street racers died and 15 were injured.

"Our success is really a combination of all the efforts," DeNecochea says, referring to the city's toughened fines and penalties along with the police department's aggressive enforcement. "The alternative that RaceLegal offers is important, but if any of those other efforts were to weaken, I think we'd see a change in the statistics."

On a typical winter night, RaceLegal now attracts about 250 racers and 1,500 spectators, DeNecochea says. (In summer, 350 cars and 2,500 spectators.) Though police officers ensure that the races are organized and run properly, competitors sign a liability waiver. After showing a valid driver's license and passing a vehicle safety inspection, they then form two lines leading to the starting line of the drag strip.

The cars are all kinds — from Mustang Mach 1's and Chevrolet sport coupes to Volkswagens and pickup trucks. Most of the racers are male, but females show up occasionally — and win. Sometimes police officers race, too, offering teenagers a chance to go head-to-head with a souped-up sheriff's cruiser.

DeNecochea says RaceLegal's insurer requires an ambulance during all racing heats. "In all the years we've been doing this," she says, "there've been only four crashes. Three drove away without a problem. One went to the hospital, but he was later released OK."

Allan F. Williams, chief scientist at the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, acknowledges the growing popularity of programs like RaceLegal. But he isn't sure what the long-term impact might be. "I'm a researcher," he says. "There just isn't a lot [of data] on legal street racing yet."

¹ See George P. Blumberg, "Full Throttle and Fully Legal," *The New York Times*, Sept. 17, 2004, p. F1.

² *Ibid.*

³ See Leonard Sax, "Teens Will Speed. Let's Watch Them Do It," *The Washington Post*, Nov. 28, 2004, p. B8.

⁴ Blumberg, *op. cit.*

⁵ "About Us," RaceLegal.com; www.racelegal.com.

⁶ Blumberg, *op. cit.*

At the same time, teens seemed to identify with rock 'n' roll music as much as they did with their cars. Rock music and cars seemed made for each other in the 1950s: Many music critics and historians have remarked that since its earliest days and even now, much of rock is about either cars or girls. Some of the first rockers on the scene, from Eddie Cochran to the Beach Boys, often sang about both. And in cities and towns large and small across America, the songs could be heard blaring from teenagers' car radios.

Teen Slaughter

It wasn't until 1975 that the Department of Transportation's Fatality Analysis Reporting System began collecting basic data on highway accidents by age groups. Disturbing trends quickly emerged.

That year, more than 8,700 teens (ages 13-19) died on U.S. roads. More than likely, similar numbers had been dying in previous years because subsequent years witnessed a steady increase in teen highway deaths: from 9,356 in 1976 to 9,940 in 1978.⁴⁷

During the 1980s, the number of teens killed in motor vehicle accidents fluctuated between a high of around 8,300 and a low of about 6,700.⁴⁸ Experts attributed the decrease in deaths from the previous decade to passage of the National Minimum Drinking Age Act (NMDAA) of 1984, which raised the drinking age to 21.

In 1982, for example, 41 percent of 16- and 17-year-olds and 57 percent of 18-to-20-year-olds who died in car crashes had blood alcohol content (BAC) of .08 or more. In 1985, the first year following enactment of NMDAA, the rates had dropped to 27 percent of 16- and 17-year-olds and 44 percent of 18-to-20-year-olds — the largest one-year

drop in alcohol-crash-related statistics ever for those age groups.⁴⁹

During the same period, media attention focused on the problem of teen drinking and driving as well, producing an additional positive effect, says Wallace of SADD.

Nevertheless, the number of teen deaths on highways still seemed extraordinarily high to some experts. "I've studied this problem for 25 years, and for a long time nobody paid attention to it at all," says Williams of the IIHS. "They sort of looked at [teen driving deaths] as collateral damage.

"In fact," he points out, "the idea of graduated licensing goes back to the 1970s. NHTSA tried to prompt states to adopt GDL programs, but no luck. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that it got started, and I don't know why. It's always been kind of a mystery."

Though variations in the different state programs and in methods of evaluating them made it impossible to as-

Did You Know . . . ?

- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for American teenagers.
- An average of 10 teen drivers a day were killed in fatal accidents in the United States in 2003. Another 308,000 were injured in fatal crashes.
- Young people ages 15-20 make up 6.7 percent of the total driving population but are involved in 14 percent of all fatal crashes.
- Nearly one in five 16-year-old drivers is involved in an accident in the first year of driving.
- Two out of three teenagers killed in motor vehicle crashes in 2002 were males.
- Since 1975, teen auto deaths have decreased more among males (40 percent) than among females (9 percent).
- 52 percent of teenage auto deaths in 2002 occurred between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m.
- In 2003, 25 percent of the young drivers killed in auto accidents were legally drunk.
- In 2003, 28 percent of the young, male drivers involved in fatal crashes had been drinking, compared with 13 percent of the young, female drivers involved in fatal crashes.
- 65 percent of young drivers who had been drinking and were involved in fatal crashes in 2003 were not wearing seat belts.
- 65 percent of teen passenger deaths occur when another teenager is driving.
- Nearly half of the fatal crashes involving 16-year-old drivers are single-vehicle crashes.

Sources: "Traffic Safety Facts 2003: Young Drivers," National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2003, and "Fatality Facts: Teenagers 2002," Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2002

sess the overall effectiveness of GDL, individual states could report their own results. For instance, in 1997, after the first year of its GDL program, Florida reported a 9 percent reduction in fatal crashes among 15-to-17-year-olds. In 1999, Michigan reported a 25 percent reduction in crashes among 16-year-olds, and North Carolina reported a 27 percent reduction.⁵⁰

In fact, teen driving accidents have declined significantly over the last 25-30 years. In the 15-19 age group, deaths per 100,000 population

dropped from 42 in 1980 to 25 in 1998.⁵¹ And while in 1975 more than 8,700 13-to-19-year-olds died in motor vehicle accidents, by 2002 the number was down to 5,933.⁵²

But the declines have slowed since the late '90s. The number of teen deaths per 100,000 population has remained at about 25 since 1998, and the number of 13-to-19-year-olds dying in crashes has been inching up since 1993, prompting the current concern and debate over what more can and should be done. ■

CURRENT SITUATION

Tougher GDLs?

Now that most states have GDL programs, the challenge is making them tougher. "In lots of places, the laws are weak," Williams says.

The IIHS and other groups, such as Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety (AHAS), call for tougher passenger restrictions and earlier curfews. In 2002, 87 percent of teenagers who died in crashes were passengers, and 41 percent died between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., even though night driving accounted for only about 15 percent of the miles driven by teens.⁵³

The AHAS recently asked state legislatures nationwide to pass new laws to help reduce all motor vehicle deaths, citing in particular the need to address teens' late-night driving. At the same time, MADD, DaimlerChrysler, the NTSB, NSC and AAA asked states to bar teens from carrying teenage passengers during their first six months of driving.⁵⁴

Harsha of the Governors Highway Safety Association is urging states to develop programs that focus specifically on older teen drivers. "Older teens have three problems," she says. "They have the lowest seat belt use of any population," she says. "And they tend to speed and drive drunk. So you need underage-drinking programs and programs targeting teen seat belt use and speeding."

Parental — and, hence, state — resistance to passenger and nighttime restrictions so far haven't deterred some, like Maryland Rep. Mandel, who plans to reintroduce her bill restricting the number of passengers allowed in cars driven by Maryland teenagers. The Maryland Senate has passed a similar bill.

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At Issue:

Are driver education courses for teenagers effective?

ALLEN ROBINSON
*CEO, AMERICAN DRIVER AND TRAFFIC SAFETY
EDUCATION ASSOCIATION*

WRITTEN FOR *THE CQ RESEARCHER*, DECEMBER 2004

you have heard before that driver education is not effective. You will read in the opposing counterpoint that driver education is not effective. Why is that? Part of the explanation is that researchers and traffic-safety professionals have used erroneous research design to evaluate driver education. Using fatalities as a comparison between trained and untrained drivers is an inappropriate approach. The reason they cannot be used in a random experiment is that there are too few fatalities to produce significant results.

The only valid, random evaluation of driver education has been the DeKalb study. When traffic crashes are used as a measure of effectiveness, the DeKalb study showed that, among those licensed to drive and who had taken driver education, accidents were significantly reduced during the first six months. The estimated magnitude of reduction ranges from 10-20 percent, depending upon control over outside variables.

Too often, comparisons are made of students who have not taken driver education with those who have taken driver education. Those who completed driver education obtained a license and were driving while those who did not complete a driver education program were not driving. When researchers do not control for exposure rates, how can you compare accident rates of two groups that are not equal that have different exposure rates?

The high initial rate of accidents is due to the inexperience of new drivers. The duration of benefit in the DeKalb study was limited to six months. The first six months of driving is the greatest risk for all new drivers and is where the accident experience is the highest. Studies conducted by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety have demonstrated that the accident rate drops by two-thirds in the first 700 miles of driving.

If not driver education, then what? Without formal driver education meeting some specified set of requirements, instruction of new teenage drivers would be left to family, friends or schools operating under no specific requirements.

When asked, the majority of parents favor driver education. Driver education depends on well-prepared teachers teaching safe driving practices using the best available teaching techniques and curricula.

ALLAN F. WILLIAMS
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WRITTEN FOR *THE CQ RESEARCHER*, DECEMBER 2004

driver education for beginners might be a convenient way to learn basic driving skills, but it does not produce drivers less likely to be in crashes. This is not a matter of opinion. The best scientific evaluations of driver education all over the world come to this conclusion. The most recent review finds “little evidence that pre-license training per se reduces crash rates in the short or longer term.”

Studies also have found an association between driver education and earlier licensure, which enhances mobility at the expense of safety. Moreover, research indicates that courses teaching advanced driving maneuvers — such as skid control — lead to more rather than fewer crashes by inspiring overconfidence and risk taking.

There is no mystery about why driver education fails to reduce crashes. Peer, parental, personal and other social influences that shape driving styles and crash involvement — which are largely beyond the reach of instructors — can readily overwhelm safety messages. As early as the 1970s, researcher Pat Waller noted the unrealistic expectations we have of driver education teachers, compared with teachers of other subjects. She asked, “Should the driver education teacher be responsible only for whether the student *can* drive adequately, or whether he *does* drive in this manner?”

No one expects a few hours of instruction in woodworking or culinary arts to produce skilled craftsmen or gourmet cooks, so why should we expect a few hours of driver education to produce skilled drivers? Even if it did, skilled drivers are not necessarily safe drivers.

Despite decades of research indicating that driver education does not reduce crashes among beginners, it continues to have tremendous popular appeal. There is great variation in the quality of driver education courses in the United States, so it is difficult to generalize about how well they teach beginners necessary skills. But even the best course is only a first step.

Experience and maturity are the keys to becoming a safer driver. In the United States we have recognized this by adopting graduated licensing, a main component of which extends the learner's period to maximize the amount of supervised driving by young beginners before they are licensed. Parents do most of the supervising. This is the best formula for preparing young beginners for the delights — and dangers — of driving.

Continued from p. 16

“My House colleagues just haven’t focused on the issue,” she says. However, she believes the recent deaths of at least 17 young people on Washington-area roads, including some in her district, may give impetus to the legislation.

Mandel hopes to follow the lead of Illinois state Sen. John Cullerton, who in 2003 sponsored a bill that prohibited any driver under 18 from driving with more than one passenger under 20, except for family members. Suburban mothers, who originally opposed the restriction because it would mean continued chauffeuring duties, finally supported the bill after learning about statistics suggesting the restriction could save lives. Their support convinced the legislature to enact the bill.⁵⁵

But police officers can’t tell by looking whether young drivers or their passengers are under the age limits. “It’s hard for police to enforce these things,” Williams says. “GDL laws are sometimes so complex that police don’t even know what they are.” Hence, many advocates insist that parents be the real enforcers of passenger restrictions and curfews.

The federal government, lacking any direct authority over motor-vehicle laws, concentrates on its Healthy People 2010 initiative, which aims to identify the most significant preventable threats to public health and establish national goals to reduce them. Some of the goals seek to reduce automobile fatalities; none focuses specifically on teens, but each involves particular issues that affect teens, such as speeding and alcohol.

Some observers speculate that Washington could link federal highway funding to state compliance with federal preferences for more state restrictions on teen driving — the same method by which the federal government convinced states to accept a national speed limit of 55 miles per hour (since repealed) and a 0.08 BAC rule.

But others don’t like that idea. “I wouldn’t want states to base teen driving restrictions on monetary incentives,” Mandel says. “I’d rather they base them on wanting to save lives.” Others, like Balko of the Cato Institute and Skrum of the National Motorists Association, oppose the idea because they feel that states are the best judges of their own driving restrictions.

Nearly all advocacy groups are seeking ways to develop or encourage parents to be more involved with teaching their teenagers to drive, particularly in supervising them during their first months of receiving a learner’s permit.

“We advocate that parents log 100 hours minimum driving with their kids, taking them out in bad conditions, show-

“We advocate that parents log 100 hours minimum driving with their kids.”

**— Eileen Buckholtz,
Administrator,
teendriving.com**

ing them the situations they may encounter and giving them a chance to practice,” says Buckholtz of teendriving.com. “That’s about the minimum you need before you can drive on your own.”

Some states already have a parent-student driver requirement, but it is not known whether parents actually fulfill it. Maryland, for example, requires teenagers to log at least 40 hours of driving with their parents before applying for a provisional license. “But we have to go on the parents’ word,” says Jeff Tosi, a spokesman for the Maryland Motor Vehicle Administration.

Moreover, a recent study questions whether parents are the best driving instructors or role models. In 2004, SADD and Liberty Mutual Insurance surveyed some 3,500 middle and high school students. About two-thirds said their parents were or would be the greatest influence on their driving habits — the same percentage that said their parents talk on cell phones while driving. In addition, almost half said their parents speed, and 31 percent reported their parents didn’t wear their seat belts.⁵⁶

The parental habits were clearly reflected in the habits of the licensed drivers who were surveyed: 62 percent said they talk on a cell phone while driving; 67 percent were speeders, and 33 percent didn’t wear a seat belt.⁵⁷

“Parents have to lead by example,” says DaimlerChrysler’s Kreibich-Staruch. “There’s no need to eat while driving, change clothes while driving, put on make-up or shave. Teens will think that’s all OK.”

She recommends that parents go to the RoadReadyTeens.org Web site, which has a portal dedicated to helping parents learn the most effective ways to positively influence their teenagers’ driving.

Meanwhile, the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association continues to help states upgrade their driver education programs. For example, ADTSEA recommends that programs emphasize teaching student drivers to anticipate risky situations and how best to respond to them. Some states, like Michigan, have expanded driver education by requiring a preliminary, standard course for new drivers, then a second round of more detailed driver education after six months of driving with a restricted license.

“We’re trying to increase the maturity and experience of young drivers,” Robinson said.⁵⁸ ■

OUTLOOK

The Marijuana Menace

I hope teen accident rates go down," says Wallace of SADD, echoing the sentiments of all safety advocates.

But they'll need more than hope: Despite some lowering of teen deaths and injuries from motor vehicle crashes when GDL programs were first implemented, teen auto death and injury rates have either remained essentially unchanged or increased over the last several years, depending on how the data are analyzed.

Harsha, of the Governors Highway Safety Association, points out that every year more teenagers take to the roads as the teen population increases, and safety programs and initiatives take a while to have a significant impact. "So, for the foreseeable future we'll continue to see what we've been seeing," she says.

Wallace fears that teens driving under the influence of drugs may be the next obstacle to reducing accident rates. "It's the phantom menace that nobody's talking about," he says. In presentations at high schools around the country, Wallace has discovered that teens have three myths about marijuana: It doesn't impair driving ability; it's not harmful and it's not addictive.

"It is," he says.

Yet, while 30 percent of teenagers say they can't drink because they'll be driving, only 18 percent will say they can't use drugs because they'll be driving, according to the SADD-Liberty Mutual study. And the majority — 68 percent — of licensed teen drivers who use drugs regularly said they frequently drug and drive.⁵⁹

SADD has joined with the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy to launch a "Steer Clear of Pot" campaign, Wallace says. The goal is to educate both parents and teenagers about

the risks of marijuana use and driving.

He remains optimistic. "When you get people to focus on the problems," he says, "they start to respond."

RoadReadyTeens.org is hoping teens and parents will respond to a CD-ROM it plans to distribute in a trial with the state motor vehicle offices of California, Texas, Virginia, Pennsylvania and New York. It will include safety information and advice for parents as well the video game "StreetWise" for teens. When parents take their teenagers to apply for a license, "there's usually a long wait in DMV offices," DaimlerChrysler's Kreibich-Staruch says. "This will give them something to do. As we raise awareness, I think it'll filter down to teens, but I don't know when we'll see any big change in fatality rates."

Some businesses see a market in parents who may think the only way to make sure their teenagers drive safely is to watch them every time they drive. SmartDriver of Houston, Texas, and Road Safety International of Thousand Oaks, Calif., have created electronic monitoring devices that can be easily installed on newer model cars. The devices record various parameters of a vehicle in operation, including speed. One device can even sound an alarm if the vehicle exceeds a particular speed or if the driver does not wear a seat belt.⁶⁰

But the effect that any measures — old or new — will have remains elusive. As Kreibich-Staruch observes, "It's tough to say what's going to happen. We can only hope that parents and teens will work together to solve this." ■

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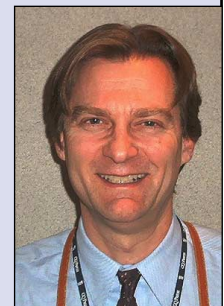
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About the Author

William Triplett covered science and the arts for such publications as *Smithsonian*, *Air & Space*, *Nature*, *Washingtonian* and *The Washington Post* before joining the *CQ Researcher* staff. He also served as associate editor of *Capitol Style* magazine. He holds a B.A. in journalism from Ohio University and an M.A. in English literature from Georgetown University. His recent reports include "Search for Extraterrestrials" and "Broadcast Indecency."



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FOR MORE INFORMATION

Advocates for Auto and Highway Safety, 750 First St., N.E., Suite 901, Washington, DC 20002; (202) 408-1711; www.saferoads.org. A coalition of insurers, citizens' groups and public health and safety organizations.

American Driver & Traffic Safety Education Association, Highway Safety Center, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, R & P Bldg., Indiana, PA 15705; (724) 357-3975; www.adtsea.org. Works with driver's education instructors and state authorities to improve driver's education standards and practices.

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 1005 N. Glebe Rd., Suite 800, Arlington, VA 22201; (703) 247-1500; www.iihs.org. Researches highway safety and conducts crash tests on new cars and trucks; funded by auto insurance companies.

Mothers Against Drunk Driving, P.O. Box 541688, Dallas, TX 75354-1688; (800) GET-MADD; www.madd.org. With more than 600 chapters nationwide, fights drunken driving and supports victims of alcohol-related crimes.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 400 Seventh St., S.W., Washington, DC 20590; (202) 366-9550; www.nhtsa.dot.gov. Issues vehicle safety standards, investigates safety defects and orders recalls when necessary.

National Safety Council, 1121 Spring Lake Dr., Itasca, IL 60143; (630) 285-1121; www.nsc.org. Conducts research and provides information on highway safety.

RoadReadyTeens, www.roadreadyteens.org. An online safety program for parents and teens sponsored by several corporate and nonprofit safety groups.

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