



Over 5,000 Deaths a Year:

The Facts About Teen Driving

Motor vehicle crashes are the number-one cause of death among American teenagers, killing 62,563 teens from 1993 to 2003. On average, well over 5,000 teens die in such crashes every year, including over 2,000 passengers, and these figures have remained fairly constant, despite all efforts. In fact, the crash and death rates for teen drivers have been tragically high ever since the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) began compiling such data in 1975.¹

In 2002, car crashes accounted for about 38 percent of all teens' deaths in the United States, far outpacing homicide (13 percent), suicide (11 percent), and a variety of other causes. Given the facts, it's surprising that teen traffic fatalities are so seldom discussed as the pressing public health issue that they really are. Former National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) head Jeffrey Runge, M.D., was cited in a recent story on *Dateline NBC*, saying that "If we had any other disease that was wiping out our teenagers at the rate of thousands per year, there would be no end to what we would do as a society to stop that."

As a group, teenage drivers have a higher crash risk than do other age groups, and 16-year-old drivers – not surprisingly – have the highest risk of all. Among these youngest and least experienced drivers, the leading cause of fatal crashes is driver error (77 percent), followed by speeding (38 percent) and alcohol (less than 25 percent). And when other teenagers are in the car, crashes are more likely to be fatal. (The overlap in percentages is explained by the fact that some crashes involve more than one factor.)

All this is true despite the fact that teenagers drive fewer miles than all but the oldest drivers. For example, **the crash rate per mile driven by 16- to 19-year-olds is four times that of older drivers, and within that group, 16-year-olds have rates twice as high as 18- and 19-year-olds.**²

ECONOMIC COSTS

The economic cost of teen crashes – in terms of lost productivity, property damage, and medical costs – is enormous. Based on NHTSA estimates, we believe that 16- and 17-year-olds alone account for about \$14 billion of the total economic cost of vehicle crashes.

Medical costs make up about 14 percent of that figure, or nearly \$2 billion annually. Former NHTSA Administrator Jeffrey Runge, M.D., estimates that "every brain injury, we believe, costs society about \$1 million."

These youngest drivers are not the only ones who die when they crash their cars. According to the most recent available data, crashes with 16- and 17-year-olds at the wheel caused a total of 5,678 deaths during the years 2002 and 2003 combined. Forty percent of the fatalities – 2,242 – were the drivers themselves. Of the remaining 3,436 deaths, 1,664 were the teen drivers' passengers, many of whom also were teens.³ These statistics are further examined, by state, on the following page. (We should note that final crash statistics for 2004 will be released late in 2005.)

“If there was a disease that was wiping out our teenagers at the rate of thousands per year, there would be no end to what we would do as a society to stop that.”— Former NHTSA head Jeffrey Runge, M.D.

Though preliminary indications suggest a slight *overall* decrease in traffic fatalities from 2003 to 2004 – a drop of around 250 people – we do not yet know what the statistics specifically for *teen* drivers will be. In any case, even if teen traffic fatalities did drop slightly in 2004, this is no reason to expect a lasting downward trend, given the previous 10 consecutive years of comparable teen fatality totals.)

INGREDIENTS OF A CRASH

Teen driving statistics are often met with resignation. However, the statistics show that teen crashes can't be chalked up to fate or freak circumstances. The crashes have predictable – and preventable – patterns and conditions:

- **Nighttime driving** – Fatal crash rates are higher at all times of the day for 16-year-olds than for older drivers, but in any given mile driven, teens are twice as likely to crash at night (9 p.m. to 6 a.m.) as during the day. Sixty percent of young teens' nighttime crashes occur before midnight. Weekend nights during the summer months have higher fatalities.⁴
- **To and from school** – Driving to and from school also carries a high crash risk, as more teens are driving during these times and are likely to have other teens in the car. After school in particular, they may be preoccupied with getting to social or extracurricular activities on time.
- **Teen passengers** – Statistics show that fatal crashes involving 16-year-old drivers are much more likely to occur when other teenagers are in the car, and that the risk of a fatal crash increases in proportion to the number of teenage passengers. Nearly half of all teen crashes in 2003 involved one or more teen passengers. Take one teen driver, add one teen male passenger, and the risk of a fatal crash nearly doubles.⁵
- **Speeding and basic driving errors** – As noted above, speeding and driver error account for the majority of teen driving fatalities. While alcohol still continues to be a factor, most new drivers are sober, but are prone to making simple driving errors or overcorrections, often while they're already speeding. For example, in 2003 alone, over 1,800 fatal crashes were caused by teens who simply failed to yield, veered out of their lane, or were driving too fast.

Given all these figures, it is not surprising that the U.S. Government's Centers for Disease Control and Prevention considers the tragedy of teen driving a pressing public health issue. What *is* surprising is that society as a whole does not. Clearly, a comprehensive public health approach is needed to make a positive difference, and a good place to start is with the attitudes teens bring to driving.

2002-2003 crash deaths involving 16- to 17-year-old drivers, by state and victim category.

	16- TO 17- YEAR-OLD DRIVERS	PASSENGERS OF 16- TO 17- YEAR-OLD DRIVERS	OCCUPANTS OF OTHER VEHICLES	NON- OCCUPANTS	TOTAL
Alabama	67	36	29	4	136
Alaska	4	1	8	1	14
Arizona	38	37	37	8	120
Arkansas	44	18	9	5	76
California	128	126	114	44	412
Colorado	40	31	31	4	106
Connecticut	20	19	11	2	52
Delaware	15	7	1	1	24
District of Columbia	1	0	3	2	6
Florida	116	84	102	39	341
Georgia	106	58	53	18	235
Hawaii	4	4	2	1	11
Idaho	17	16	7	1	41
Illinois	88	85	54	17	244
Indiana	59	47	41	6	153
Iowa	23	24	15	2	64
Kansas	31	26	18	3	78
Kentucky	71	43	35	4	153
Louisiana	48	27	15	5	95
Maine	12	8	4	3	27
Maryland	27	25	15	5	72
Massachusetts	16	17	10	6	49
Michigan	81	52	61	18	212
Minnesota	58	40	23	9	130
Mississippi	48	27	29	3	107
Missouri	80	58	50	19	207
Montana	13	6	4	1	24
Nebraska	23	20	8	0	51
Nevada	17	14	8	5	44
New Hampshire	6	3	3	0	12
New Jersey	22	16	17	5	60
New Mexico	22	26	13	5	66
New York	55	68	34	21	178
North Carolina	72	51	48	11	182
North Dakota	5	2	4	1	12
Ohio	93	72	61	13	239
Oklahoma	40	29	26	3	98
Oregon	21	29	15	0	65
Pennsylvania	93	65	44	15	217
Rhode Island	7	3	2	0	12
South Carolina	58	26	22	4	110
South Dakota	12	14	8	2	36
Tennessee	65	42	31	11	149
Texas	175	133	149	37	494
Utah	27	16	8	2	53
Vermont	8	0	4	0	12
Virginia	50	42	28	6	126
Washington	37	22	23	10	92
West Virginia	21	11	7	2	41
Wisconsin	51	35	38	4	128
Wyoming	7	3	1	1	12
U.S. Total	2,242 (40 percent)	1,664 (29 percent)	1,383 (24 percent)	389 (7 percent)	5,678

Based on the most recent data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration



“I know I’m going to be a distracted driver. I’m always playing music or on the cell phone, and I’m not willing to turn off my phone when I’m in the car.”

— Female teen