Automobile Insurance Q & A Handout

Provided by the Insurance Education Institute

In every country in the world where cars are a common means of transportation, teenagers are disproportionately involved in motor vehicle crashes. The seriousness of this problem has been recognized for decades, and most public policies have had little impact on the problem. Newer approaches, such as graduated licensing systems, are being enacted to try to reduce teenage crashes and the deaths and injuries they cause.

1. How serious is the teenage motor vehicle crash problem? In 2003, 5,691 teenagers died in the United States from motor vehicle crash injuries. Such injuries are by far the leading public health problem for young people 13-19 years old. The crash risk is particularly high during the first years in which teenagers are eligible for driver's licenses. Thirty-nine percent of all deaths of 16-19 year-olds from all causes in 2001 were related to motor vehicles. This is the latest year for which this information is available.

2. How do teenage crash rates compare with rates among drivers of other ages? Teenage drivers have very high rates of both fatal and nonfatal crashes compared with drivers of other ages. This is true whether the rates are based on the total number of teenagers, on the number with licenses, or on miles driven. Both licensure rates and miles driven per license holder are lower among 16-19 year-olds than among drivers age 20 and older (as a group), so when crash involvement is based on the number of licensed drivers instead of total population, the fatality rate of teenage drivers is even more extreme compared with older drivers. It is most extreme when crash involvement is based on miles driven.

Many teenagers die as passengers in motor vehicles. Fifty-nine percent of teenage passenger deaths in 2003 occurred in crashes in which another teenager was driving. Teenagers far exceed all other age groups in terms of per capita deaths as both drivers and passengers, but their passenger fatality rates are much more extreme compared with those of older drivers. Among teenage drivers, 16 year-olds have by far the highest rates of teenage passenger deaths per licensed driver and per mile driven.

A 1999 Highway Loss Data Institute study reported that insurance injury claim frequencies and overall collision (vehicle damage) losses for cars insured for teenagers to drive are more than double those of cars insured for use by adults only. Collision losses for drivers age 21 and younger, as for drivers of other ages, are highest for sports and luxury models and lowest for large station wagons and passenger vans.

3. How do teenage crash rates compare with rates among elderly drivers? Although elderly drivers' mileage-based crash rates are as high as teenagers', older drivers have much lower per capita rates. The fact that relatively few elderly drivers are involved in crashes, despite their high crash risk, is attributable to their lesser exposure. The rate of licensure is lower among the elderly than among younger people, and elderly people with licenses drive fewer miles, on average, than do younger drivers.

4. How do crashes involving teenagers differ from those of other drivers? Teenagers not only have higher crash rates than other age groups, but they also have crashes that are different. Analyses of fatal crash data indicate that teenage drivers are more likely to be at fault in their crashes. Teenagers' crashes and violations are more likely to involve speeding than those of older drivers, and teenagers are more likely than drivers of other ages to be in single-vehicle fatal crashes. Plus, teenagers do more of their driving in small and older cars[3] and at night, compared with adults. In 2003, 42 percent of teenagers' fatalities occurred between 9 pm and 6 am, and 54 percent occurred on a Friday, Saturday, or Sunday.

And for 16 year-olds, all these problems are heightened. The combination of inexperience behind the wheel and immaturity produces a pattern of fatal crashes among 16 year-olds that includes the highest percentage of crashes involving speeding, the highest percentage of single-vehicle crashes, and the highest percentage of crashes with driver error.

5. Why is teenage crash involvement so high? Immaturity and lack of driving experience are the main reasons. Compared with older drivers, teenagers as a group are more willing to take risks and less likely to use safety belts. They also are more likely than older drivers to underestimate the dangers associated with hazardous situations and less able to cope with such dangers.

6. What requirements do states have for teenagers learning to drive? Traditionally, states have required beginning teenage drivers to have very little experience before obtaining licenses that let them drive when and where they want. In 1995, only 30 states required a learner's permit, and only 11 required the permit to be held for a minimum period, ranging from 14 to 90 days. Today, as graduated licensing programs are being implemented, the picture has changed. The majority of states now have a three-stage licensing system for young drivers.

7. Is alcohol an important factor in teenagers' crashes? Yes. Young drivers are less likely than adults to drive after drinking, but their crash risk is substantially higher when they do. This is especially true at low and moderate blood alcohol concentrations (BACs) and is thought to result from teenagers' relative inexperience with both drinking and driving. Among fatally injured teenage passenger vehicle drivers (16-19 years old), 30 percent of males and 13 percent of females in 2003 had high BACs (0.08 percent or more), even though every state has a legal minimum alcohol purchasing age of 21 years.

8. What works when it comes to teenagers driving while impaired by alcohol? Many states raised minimum alcohol purchasing ages from 18 or 19 years old to 21 during the 1980s. All states now have 21-year-old alcohol purchasing age laws, which successfully reduce alcohol-related crashes among teenagers.

However, enforcement is needed to make these laws even more effective. All fifty states and the District of Columbia have zero BAC thresholds for teenage drivers, prompted by federal legislation that took effect October 1, 1998. Research from states where this policy was implemented earlier indicated a reduction in teenagers' nighttime fatal crashes.

9. What can be done to reduce teenagers' high crash rates? The most effective policies limit teenagers' driving exposure — for example, night driving and passenger restrictions for beginning drivers and higher ages for initial licensure. General curfews that apply to all late-night activities for 13-17 year-olds also reduce crashes and crash injuries. Graduated licensing, designed to provide beginning drivers with an opportunity to gain experience behind the wheel under conditions that minimize risk, was originally introduced in New Zealand in 1987. Beginning with Florida in 1996, almost all states have now introduced elements of graduated licensing. Evaluations of graduated licensing systems in New Zealand, Nova Scotia, Florida, Ohio, North Carolina, and Michigan have shown them to reduce crashes substantially.

10. Do driver education programs make teens safer? Formal evaluations of U.S. high school driver education programs indicate little or no effect in reducing crashes per licensed driver. And offering driver education in schools has an unintended negative effect on crash involvement by encouraging early licensure among 16-17 year-olds. The net result is more crashes per capita among teenagers. Connecticut eliminated high school driver education and lowered teenage crash rates by reducing licensure. Other school-based programs, such as those intended to reduce alcohol-impaired driving, have not been shown to be effective, at least in the short term.

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Q&A: TEENAGERS — GRADUATED DRIVER LICENSING

