

Driving While Distracted

Inexperienced teen drivers too often take fatal risks.

BY MATT SUNDEEN

On a June night in 2007, a fiery head-on collision killed five young women in upstate New York. The victims, all of whom had graduated from high school five days earlier, died instantly when their sports utility vehicle swerved across a two-lane road into oncoming traffic and slammed into a tractor trailer. According to the police, a flurry of text messages and phone calls were sent on the 17-year-old driver's cell phone moments before the accident. This distraction, the driver's inexperience behind the wheel, the vehicle's high rate of speed and the time of day were all cited as likely factors in the crash.

Unfortunately, the tragedy in New York vividly demonstrated something that parents and traffic safety experts have known for years: Teens generally don't make good drivers. Inexperienced teen drivers are more easily distracted than others. Behind the wheel they are less likely to recognize and react quickly to dangerous driving conditions. New drivers, particularly young men, often show off and are prone to taking risks.

Although teens drive less than all but the oldest drivers, they account for a disproportionate number of fatal accidents. The crash rate per mile driven for 16- to 19-year-olds is

four times higher than the rate for older drivers, and motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death among 13- to 19-year-olds in the United States.

TEEN LICENSING LAWS

For years, state lawmakers have attempted to improve teen driver safety through changes in licensing requirements, known as graduated driver licensing. These state laws most often include limits on nighttime driving and restrictions on the number of unrelated passengers allowed in the car. Although most traffic safety experts still believe these laws provide the best chance to improve safety, state lawmakers are now addressing a new phenomenon that perhaps affects teens more acutely than any other demographic: driver distraction.

"The combination of inexperience and distraction is highly dangerous in younger drivers," says Arizona Representative Steve Farley, who is sponsoring several bills this year that he hopes will curb teen driver distraction.



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STEVE FARLEY
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"Distracted driving can be as impairing as drunk driving. It's been a big problem here and I knew that I had do something about it."

Experts estimate that as many as 80 percent of motor vehicle crashes and 65 percent of near crashes have driver inattention as a contributing cause. Each year in the United States, the 4.9 million driver distraction related crashes kill approximately 34,400 people, cause 2.1 million injuries and trigger as much as \$184 billion in property damage.

A virtually limitless list of events and activities, both inside and outside the vehicle, have the potential to distract. In a 2007 Nationwide Insurance survey, drivers confessed to a laundry list of misbehaviors while driving that included daydreaming, fixing their hair, texting, comforting children and putting pets in their lap. They also acknowledged switching seats with passengers, reading books, writing grocery lists, watching movies, nursing babies, putting in contacts, painting toenails, urinating out the car window, shaving and changing shoes.

THE SAFETY OF CELL PHONES

The most common distracting activity is using a cell phone or other wireless device such as a BlackBerry. CTIA, the international association of the wireless telecommunications industry, reports that wireless communications devices are found in 81 percent of households and more than 255 million peo-

ple now subscribe to wireless services in the United States. Experts estimate that as many 73 percent of drivers use their cell phone.

Clearly, these figures have grabbed the attention of legislators. Within the last five years, lawmakers in every state have considered some sort of restriction on cell phones in the car, and 29 states and the District of Columbia have passed laws to regulate cell phone use while driving. The strictest provisions, found in six states, the District of Columbia, and many local communities, prohibit all drivers from using hand-held wireless communication devices.

Enforcement of these laws can be difficult, but since 2001, when New York passed its total ban on using hand-held devices, a million people have been ticketed.

TARGETING THE YOUNG

The new trend in states, however, is to specifically target younger drivers. Studies have found that drivers between the ages of 16 and 24 are twice as likely than older drivers to use the phone. In 2003, the National Transportation Safety Board recommended that states limit or completely prohibit young drivers from using cell phones. Since then, 17 states have passed such restrictions. California and



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Maine prohibit all teenage drivers from using any wireless communications device while operating a motor vehicle. Fifteen other states and the District of Columbia prohibit drivers who have only a learner's permit from using them. As of March, legislatures in 16 other states were considering similar restrictions.

"I introduced the bill because I thought it would save lives," says Senator Joe Simitian, who sponsored California's law. "The data about teenage driver safety are really compelling, and I had no opposition to the restriction. Parents come up to me all the time and thank me for the bill. In a lot of ways the public is ahead of the Legislature on this issue."

TEXTING TROUBLES TOO

Legislators are also addressing a relatively new cell phone danger, known as driving while texting, that seems to disproportion-



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ately affect younger motorists. It's estimated that wireless subscribers send approximately 158 billion text messages in the United States each year. Although the exact number of text messages sent or received by people who are driving is unknown, a recent survey found that 20 percent of drivers admit to doing it. The rate, however, is much higher for younger drivers. The same survey found that a whopping 66 percent of drivers ages 18 through 24 use wireless devices to send or receive text messages while driving.

"I visited a high school class two years ago and was shocked at how many kids told me they text while driving," says Washington Representative Joyce McDonald. "It's obvious that it's a lethal combination. I read that average drivers take their eyes off the road something like 14 times every 30 seconds if they are texting. When you are driving fast on the highway it's not a place to take more risks."

A 2007 Harris Interactive poll found that 91 percent of Americans think that driving while texting is as dangerous as drunk driving, and 89 percent of Americans support prohibitions on driving while texting. State legislators are taking notice. In 2007, Washington legislators passed the first law to specifically prohibit sending or receiving text messages while driving. New Jersey passed a similar restriction soon after, but, differing from Washington, chose to enforce its law as a primary offense. At least 21 states were considering such proposals as of March.

It seems likely that as texting and cell phone use factor more often in crashes such as the one in New York, more states will look at restrictions on younger drivers.

"You can't take other people's lives into your hands with this kind of behavior," says Washington's McDonald. "I just hope this law helps."

RESTRICTIONS ON CELL PHONE USE BY YOUNG DRIVERS

Twenty-nine states and the District of Columbia have some kind of cell-phone law. Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, Utah, Washington and the District of Columbia prohibit all drivers from using a hand-held phone while driving. California will do so come July.



- Prohibit all drivers under 18 from using cell phones
- Prohibit drivers of a certain age with only a learner's permit from using cell phones
- Prohibits drivers of a certain age with only a learner's permit from using cell phones and prohibits all drivers from texting
- Prohibits driving while texting

Source: NCSL

CHECK OUT additional information on driver focus and technology, traffic safety and laws aimed at young drivers at www.ncsl.org/magazine.