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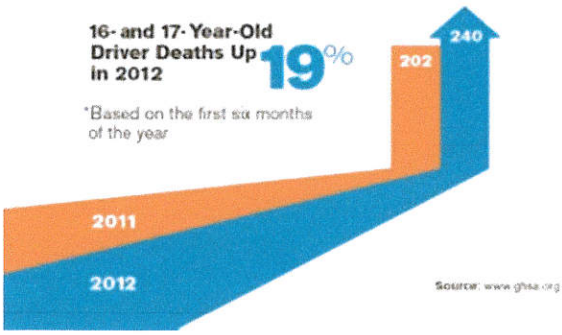
What To Do About The Sudden Surge In Teen Traffic Deaths



Here's a disturbing statistic. Traffic fatalities among 16- and 17-year-old drivers jumped by a whopping 19 percent during the first six months of 2012, according to preliminary data compiled by the Governors Highway Safety Administration (GHSA). This is more than twice the nine percent increase in overall traffic deaths reported during the same period by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

This figure is even more troubling given the fact that the number of teenage drivers on the road has declined precipitously in recent years. A study conducted last year by the University of Michigan Transportation Research Institute (UMTRI) suggests that only about 46 percent of 17 year olds are licensed to drive, versus 69 percent in 1983.

The recent increase in highway deaths is an abrupt reversal of fortune, and it follows a 26 percent drop in traffic fatalities recorded between 2005 and 2011, which was largely credited to safer cars, stricter state DUI and seatbelt laws and, specifically as far as younger motorists are concerned, licensing procedures that placed increased restrictions on teen driving.

The UMTRI attributes this sudden increase to the otherwise welcome reversal of the nation's economic fortunes, with more trucks on the road and drivers less concerned about driving fewer miles and at slower speeds to save on fuel costs. GHSA researcher Dr. Allan Williams further attributes the surge in teen-driver deaths (from 202 in the first six months of 2011 to 240 during the same period last year) to the unfortunate prospect that the benefit of state graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws may be tapering off. "It appears that we are headed the wrong direction when it comes to deaths of 16- and 17-year-old drivers," says Dr. Williams.

Most GDL programs require teens to take a driver's education course and engage in a pre-licensing learning stage with full supervised driving for between 30 and 60 hours (depending on the state) before becoming eligible to take the licensing exam. Once licensed, teen

drivers must go through an intermediate stage for a set period that limits unsupervised driving at certain times, with most states limiting the number of non-family-member passengers and imposing other restrictions.

For its part, the GHSA suggests states strengthen their GDL laws (or improve compliance with existing provisions) and bolster their driver education programs, particularly with regard to distracted driving, which continues to be a problem among today's text-messaging teens. The UMTRI recently found that 26 percent of teen drivers surveyed said they read or sent a text message from a smartphone at least once every time they take the wheel. Barbara Harsha, the GHSA's executive director, believes states should require parents to become more involved in their teenage drivers' training than just going along for the ride. "Parents have a huge responsibility to ensure safe teen driving behavior," she says. "States can facilitate this by providing innovative programs that bring parents and teens together around this issue."

As a parent of a 16-year-old driver-in-training who's only recently become able to sit quietly in the passenger's seat without going into cardiac arrest any time the speedometer needle climbs past the 25 mph mark, I eagerly second the motion. I was flummoxed how unprepared my son was for all but the most elemental around-the-block driving when we stared this journey together, given the limited amount of practical training he was required to complete by the state of Illinois.

He came out of the experience with zero time spent on the highway, absolutely no idea how to conduct an evasive steering maneuver, modulate the brakes, turn out of a skid or, for that matter, patiently negotiate stop-and-go driving. The dangers of distracted driving might have been mentioned – likely in an easily tuned-out chiding manner – but they were certainly not demonstrated; it would have been useful for the kids to see for themselves what happens when they try and make a call or answer a test message while piloting a car around traffic cones in a parking lot. I doubt he was even taught how to properly set the seat/steering wheel adjustments and mirrors.

Certainly more classroom time and behind-the-wheel training would be a plus. At the least, driver training in the U.S. could benefit from adopting the European practice of using professional instructors rather than the ad hoc supervision currently afforded by moonlighting high school teachers. Sorry Coach, placing one's hands at the 10:00 and 2:00 positions on the steering wheel and turning it a hand-over-hand fashion is neither the best nor the safest way to negotiate a turn.