

Teen Driving: A Community Health Problem?

Auto accidents are now the leading cause of death for Americans between the ages of 16 and 20, killing 5,500 young people annually. Two-thirds of victims are boys.

The 12 million adolescent drivers now on our nation's highways make up just 6 percent of the driving population, they constitute 14 percent of deadly crashes. Accident risk is highest among the youngest of these drivers -- with 16 year olds being almost nine times more likely to crash than the general driving public.

Additionally, 450,000 teens are injured each year in car crashes, and 27,000 are hospitalized as a result.

The most dangerous way a teenager can get to and from school is by driving in a car with another teenager. A 16 or 17 year old has a 40 percent greater risk of crashing when he or she is driving with a peer. That risk doubles when driving with two teenagers, and quadruples with driving three or more peers.

One need only turn to the national Center for Injury and Prevention Control (CDC) to examine the extent of the alarming disparity of unintentional deaths in Virginia. Visit <http://webappa.cdc.gov/cgi-bin/broker.exe> for an eye-opening look at the statistics.

Have we as community members come to accept the inevitability of teen crashes as simply a right of passage? Do we accept that this passage could result in injury and, tragically, death? Or do we place limits on our newly licensed teenagers as to when and where and with whom they may drive?

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Parents who limit or prohibit newly licensed teens from driving at night or driving unsupervised with adolescent peers are key to saving kids' lives, according to the American Association of Pediatrics (AAP) statement published in the December 2006 issue of Pediatrics.

"The number one issue here is parental involvement," Dr. Jeffrey Weiss, head of general pediatrics at Phoenix Children's Hospital and a member of AAP's Committee on Injury, Violence and Poison Prevention. "We want parents to understand that young novice drivers – the 16 and 17 year olds – have some limitations in their abilities based on their age, so when parents place restrictions on their driving, that keeps them out of dangerous situations."

What is your definition of a community health problem?

Thanks to the Center for Disease Control <http://www.cdc.gov/> and: Alan Mozes HealthDay News, December 12, 2006.