

The Crisis of Unsafe Teen Driving

Dangerous driving among teens has reached epidemic levels, nationally and in our local communities. This assertion is supported by some alarming statistics.

- The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) reports that more than 6,000 teenagers die each year in car crashes and hundreds of thousands more suffer life-altering injuries.
- In 2002, the estimated economic cost of police-reported crashes from teen drivers ages 15-20 exceeded \$40 billion.¹
- While this age group makes up only 7% of licensed drivers, teens suffer 14% of all fatalities and 20% of all reported crashes. Additionally, car crashes account for more than one-third of all deaths among 16-18 year olds.²
- The number of car crashes in Virginia involving teens has risen steadily over the last three years. In FY2003, there were 144 fatal crashes, vs. 133 in 2002 and 114 in 2001. The number of crash-related injuries among Virginia teens has increased significantly, with 241 injured in 2003, vs. 172 in 2002 and 132 in 2001.³

Undoubtedly, the number of teens dying in car crashes will continue to climb as the number of licensed drivers in this age group increases. Based on current population trends, there will be 23% more 16- to 20-year-old drivers on the nation's roads in 2010 than there are today.⁴ In Virginia alone, more than 92,000 people receive their first driver's license each year⁵; the vast majority of them are teens.

Whether a fender bender or a fatality, all car crashes involving teens have a common denominator: a potentially deadly combination of inexperience, risk-taking, and distraction. Teens' natural attraction to risk is worsened by external factors (e.g., popular culture and peer pressure) as well as internal factors (teens' cognitive and physiological inability to assess, manage, and avoid risk). Additionally, teens are unable to manage the increasing number of distractions vying for their attention while driving – such as cell phones and other electronics equipment.

Risky, unsafe teen driving is a serious public health problem with a constellation of symptoms: attraction to risk, immature decision-making skills, youthful arrogance, multiple distractions, lack of parental supervision, and more. Only by raising awareness of the causes and consequences of this public health problem can we influence the way teens drive, and ultimately, save lives in our community.

¹www.nhtsa.dot.gov, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration website.

²ibid.

³Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles

⁴www.DriveHomeSafe.com.

⁵Virginia Department of Motor Vehicles.