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## **Deadly teen auto crashes show a pattern**

A common formula for teen deaths on the USA's roadways: Put a 16-year-old boy at the wheel of an SUV. Add two or three teens, including at least one other boy. Send them out at night. Finally, let them travel fast – and unbelted.

Those common factors emerged when USA TODAY examined all the deadly crashes involving 16-to-19-year-old drivers in 2003. About 3,500 teenagers died in teen-driven vehicles in the USA that year – a death toll that tops that of any disease or injury for teens. The South proved to be the deadliest region.

More than two-thirds of fatal single-vehicle teen crashes involved nighttime driving or at least one passenger age 16 to 19. Nearly three-fourths of the drivers in those crashes were male. And 16-year-old drivers were the riskiest of all. Their rate of involvement in fatal crashes was nearly five times that of drivers ages 20 and older, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

## **Teen brains not developed**

New medical research helps explain why. The part of the brain that weighs risks and controls impulsive behavior isn't fully developed until about age 25, according to the National Institutes of Health. Some state legislators and safety activists question whether 16-year-olds should be licensed to drive.

Sixteen-year-olds are far worse drivers than 17-, 18- or 19-year-olds, statistics show. Tellingly, New Jersey, which has long barred 16-year-olds from having unrestricted driver's licenses, for years has had one of the lowest teen fatality rates in the USA.

Other jurisdictions, too, have found the only sure way to cut the teen death toll is to limit unsupervised driving by 16-year-olds. Seven states and the District of Columbia don't give unrestricted licenses to anyone under 18. In Britain and Germany, teens can't drive until ages 17 and 18, respectively.

Rules that restrict driving at 16 have clearly had a positive effect, the insurance institute says. As the proportion of 16-year-olds in the USA with driver's licenses has declined from a decade ago, so has the proportion of 16-year-olds involved in fatal crashes. But the rate among those who are licensed has shown no improvement.

On an average day in the USA, 10 teenagers are killed in teen-driven vehicles. Some days are far worse. Crashes that occurred on one of the deadliest days of 2003 - Nov. 1 - killed 26 teens.

The death toll could swell in coming years. A record 17.5 million teens will be eligible to drive once the peak of the "baby boomlet" hits driving age by the end of this decade - 1.3 million more than were eligible in 2000.

Horrific as teenage deaths are, the collective response from their families is often one of grim acceptance. Jeffrey Runge, a former emergency room doctor who's now head of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, shudders to recall how some parents reacted to hearing their teens had just died in a crash.

"It was amazing how many people would say, 'I guess it was just his time,' " Runge says.

Runge acknowledges that safety advocates have failed to adequately publicize what's known about why teens die in crashes. State laws often don't restrict behavior that's linked to many teen fatalities.

Nearly all states have some form of "graduated licensing" programs that limit driving privileges for new teenage drivers. In some states, the rules restrict whom teens can transport and when they can drive. Teen fatalities have declined in states with the programs, according to a new report by the insurance institute.

But the institute and other safety experts note that despite those programs, thousands of teens are still being killed on the roads. The reason, they say: Graduated licensing rules are poorly enforced and often riddled with loopholes.

When risks rise

A review of crash statistics finds clear patterns. The risk to teen lives rises when:

- A 16-year-old is at the wheel. Along with their higher rate of involvement in fatal crashes, 16-year-olds make driving errors, exceed speed limits, run off roads and roll their vehicles over at higher rates than do older drivers involved in fatal crashes.

"They're the youngest, so they are all inexperienced at that age," says Allan Williams, the institute's former chief scientist. "They're pushing the limits, trying out new things ... and they don't really have the controls over risk-taking in terms of judgment and decision-making."

- They're riding with other teens. Forty percent of 16-year-old drivers involved in deadly single-vehicle crashes in 2003 had one or more teen passengers. Teens' risk of dying nearly doubles with the addition of one male passenger, the insurance institute says. It more than doubles with two or more young men in the car.

Jackie Swanson, 18, had two passengers – her 16-year-old cousin, Thomas, and a 17-year-old friend, James Newton – and was driving about 90 mph when she lost control of a Firebird convertible in a 2003 Louisiana crash. Swanson struck another car, scaled a guardrail and went airborne across several lanes of traffic. The three unbelted teens were ejected and killed.

Thomas Swanson, Thomas' father and Jackie's uncle, says the loss forced him to relapse temporarily into cocaine addiction. "I was trying to bury the deaths with the drugs," Swanson says.

- They're in teen-driven cars after dark. Teen drivers are three times as likely as drivers 20 and older to be involved in fatal crashes between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., the institute says, and 16-year-olds die at night at twice the rate as in the daytime. It's harder to see at night, so it's harder to react quickly to obstacles. Inexperienced drivers are more vulnerable to making errors after dark.

Jennifer McElmurray, of Evans, Ga., who turned 16 in February 2003, was driving that June when she lost control of her car and hit a stand of trees. Her car

was engulfed in flames. McElmurray survived the crash, but her two male passengers, ages 16 and 17, died. The nighttime curfew for new drivers was midnight; the sheriff was called to the scene at 11:56 p.m.

- The young driver loses control. Driver error is involved in 77% of fatal crashes involving 16-year-old drivers but in less than 60% of crashes with drivers 20 and older.

About a third of all 16-year-old drivers and a quarter of 17-to-19-year-old drivers involved in fatal crashes rolled their vehicles. Rollovers often occur when a driver overcorrects and runs off the road. Inexperienced teens are most likely to do so.

On a July night in 2003, Jessie Bell, 16, was following a car driven by her boyfriend on a Missouri highway with a 65-mph speed limit when she lost control. The vehicle rolled into a ditch, and she died.

- They're in an unsuitable vehicle. Because they're in the age group most likely to be involved in a crash, teens should occupy vehicles least likely to roll and most protective when they crash, highway safety experts say. Yet, teens often wind up in small cars, which are especially vulnerable when hit by larger vehicles, or in SUVs, which are more prone to roll over.

Two years ago, Runge caused a stir when he noted he would never let his inexperienced teens drive a vehicle with a two-star (out of five) rollover rating from the safety administration. Only SUVs and pickups score that low in the ratings.

Terry Khristian Rider, 16, died after he was partly ejected from the GMC SUV he was driving in a 2003 crash in Orangeburg, S.C. His uncle, John Rider, says Terry borrowed the vehicle to drive his girlfriend home before midnight. "Those things are kind of top-heavy, and it doesn't take a whole lot of correcting to roll them," Rider says. "I think it's wrong for people to let kids drive (SUVs)."

- They drive in more dangerous regions. Eight of the 10 states with the highest teen-driver fatal crash-involvement rates are in the South. Highway safety officials from Southern states, including Alabama, Louisiana and Mississippi, say lax enforcement of

speeding or alcohol laws and many rural, tree-lined roads that provide little margin for error make their states deadlier for young drivers.

Kim Proctor, Mississippi's highway safety chief, blames weak seat-belt laws in her state, Florida and Kentucky and difficulty in getting many pickup drivers and minorities to buckle up.

Parents have no idea

Kathy Schaefer, the mother of Florida crash victim Casey Hersch, and Melissa Herberz, Lauren Gorham's mother, had no idea of the odds their daughters were facing the July night they were killed.

"I was a very controlling parent," Schaefer says. "But I never thought my child would be killed in a car."

To this day, Schaefer frequently stays in her bedroom all day, mourning the loss of her only child.

The mothers didn't know that the vehicle their daughters were in at the time — a Ford Explorer Sport Trac SUV with a pickup bed — had earned a low two-star government rollover rating. Nor did they recognize the risk the girls faced with a 16-year-old boy driving several passengers. Male teen drivers are about 75% more likely than female teen drivers to be involved in fatal crashes, the insurance institute says.

Florida had the fourth-worst teen fatal-crash rate in 2003. It isn't among the 28 states that restrict how many passengers 16-year-old-drivers can have, and it's one of 30 states that forbid police to stop drivers solely for not wearing safety belts; none of the teens was belted.

Florida does have an 11 p.m. driving curfew for 16- and 17-year-old drivers. The crash occurred just after 9 p.m.

Highway safety officials around the USA complain that many state legislators, pressured by parents, have refused to tighten laws to bar teens from driving at night or from having teen passengers, despite clear evidence those factors sharply raise the risk of teen deaths.

Safety officials note that of the 38 states with nighttime driving restrictions, more than half don't start those restrictions until at least midnight – when, they say, most younger teens are not out.

"There's so much research that has shown (graduated licensing) makes a huge difference that we have been trying almost desperately to get (our law) upgraded," says Alabama traffic safety chief Rhonda Pines. Alabama lets 16-year-olds drive after midnight if they're returning from a hunting or fishing trip and have their parents' consent. The state also lets 16-year-olds have up to three teen passengers, in addition to family members.

There are also regional disparities in how alcohol and speeding prohibitions are treated. In Mississippi, where fatalities often occur on tree-lined roads, only one county authorizes sheriffs to use radar guns. Speeding laws are seldom enforced on those roads, Proctor says.

Some states will license even teens who got speeding tickets while driving with a learner's permit.

James Champagne, chairman of the national Governors Highway Safety Association, laments what he calls a casual attitude toward alcohol abuse in his home state of Louisiana. Yet Champagne, a former state police lieutenant colonel, notes it isn't easy to enforce graduated licensing. "Police will look at it as a priority depending on what importance the public puts on it," says Champagne, the Louisiana governor's highway safety director.

Those who advocate graduated licensing say the laws assume parents will enforce them. But interviews with safety officials and crash reports suggest parents often let teens skirt the laws, don't know the rules or aren't aware their kids are driving. The parents of at least two teens killed in 2003 car crashes thought their kids were washing, not driving, the car.

"We don't have police officers on every corner," Champagne says. "Too many parents expect the police to be the parent."

Hard to move forward

Gayle Bell was doing everything that seemed appropriate for a parent when Jessie died in her crash. But she no longer thinks 16-year-olds are old enough to drive. Jessie was ejected from her Chevrolet Cavalier coupe in El Dorado Springs, Mo. Bell says the grieving "melts your body down."

Jessie got her license in March 2003 and her car three months later. She was driving the next month, at night, when she crashed.

"Really, the only way to get the experience is to go out and drive," Bell says. "If I had to swerve, I would know how to do it. Jessie really didn't."

Marvin Zuckerman, a psychologist and former professor at the University of Delaware, for years has studied another reason, beyond inexperience and immaturity, why teens tend to be risky drivers. He calls it "sensation seeking."

In driving terms, it's a desire to derive a thrill from the experience. Zuckerman doesn't think full licenses should be awarded until age 21. His research has found that the desire to take risks and act impulsively peaks around age 19 or 20. "It's no coincidence the peak accident rates are in those age ranges," Zuckerman says.

James Avello, 18, Hersch's former boyfriend, who recovered from injuries he suffered in the crash, says the loss of their friends has had little effect on the driving of his classmates at Chaminade-Madonna College Preparatory School. Avello sold his SUV in favor of a less rollover-prone Mazda Millenia sedan. But many teens, he says, drive their own, often-sporty, cars to school on major highways.

Gerald Miller, 18, the driver in the crash, transferred to another high school after enduring death threats from classmates who blamed him for the deaths, says his mother, Geralyn. She says her son needed intensive therapy.

On the 8th of every month, Schaefer visits the spot on I-95 where her daughter was killed on July 8, 2003. It's marked with an Eeyore, Winnie the Pooh's slow but lovable donkey sidekick. Her daughter's volleyball

coach gave her that name during a lackluster performance, and it stuck.

After the crash, Casey Hersch's mother and stepfather moved out of the family home to try to escape their anguish. The family still owns the home, now unoccupied. Casey's bedroom, filled with Eeyores, remains untouched. Schaefer still runs the girl's volleyball team concession and goes to school soccer games. Those are about the only commitments in life that she keeps.

"A mother's life is all about being devoted to her child," says Schaefer, who chose laughter as her cell phone ring tone because she so seldom hears it anymore. "One crazy night took everything away."

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