



CHRONIC

A Report on the State of Teen Driving 2005



Allstate
FOUNDATION

The Allstate Foundation is an independent, private, non-profit organization funded by subsidiaries of The Allstate Corporation. The Allstate Foundation develops and funds programs across the United States that focus on three areas:

- safe and vital communities
- tolerance, inclusion and diversity
- economic empowerment

One way to make America’s communities safer is to help American teens become as safe as they can be on the road. It is with that goal in mind that The Allstate Foundation, in conjunction with an expert advisory board and with the knowledge, experience, and resources of our program partners, has prepared this report on the state of teen driving. Our focus is teen *attitudes*, the underlying mindset that conventional teen-driver programs largely do not address. Making a positive difference in the way teens think about driving offers the best hope of reducing teen accidents and deaths – and that’s our goal.

To contact The Allstate Foundation about this program, or to access an electronic copy of this report, please visit www.allstate.com/community/chronic.htm.

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Survey Questions and Results



In addition to conducting extensive research on teen drivers' attitudes, The Allstate Foundation also reviewed results of two recent studies of brain development in adolescents and young adults. The research helps explain why teens' attitudes – and therefore their driving – are largely unaffected by conventional safe-driving programs.



Executive Summary

Last year in the United States – and every year for the past decade – between 5,000 and 6,000 teenagers were killed in motor vehicle accidents. No other kind of hazard or behavior comes close to claiming as many teen lives. And in addition to those killed each year, some 300,000 are injured.

These are staggering numbers, representing a chronic public health issue that has yet to find a high enough place on the national public health agenda. For even though the past several years have seen a large and continuing proliferation of teen-driver safety programs all across the country, we see these sad totals year after year. And with an expected 23-percent increase in the number of teen drivers on the road in just five years, the problem will likely only get worse unless new approaches to teen driving safety are found.

It was with the goal of identifying effective new approaches that The Allstate Foundation closely examined the problem of teen driving. We have compiled our findings and recommendations in this report. Working with a diverse panel of expert advisers, we looked at existing programs and studied the available data. We also commissioned original research on teen attitudes toward driving – a national online survey of 1,000 teens between 15 and 17 years old. Respondents were drawn from a diverse mix of ethnic backgrounds and from both genders. Some already had their driver's licenses; others were expecting to get theirs in the near future.

A FOCUS ON ROOT CAUSES

Evidence from this wealth of sources suggests that the shocking statistics of the last decade won't change for the better until the safe-driving efforts aimed at teens attack some of the *root causes* of unsafe teen driving. For the most part, conventional teen-driver safety programs have not addressed root causes associated with teen attitudes and mindset.

- The first of these root causes is *social*: simple peer pressure nudges teens towards risky driving habits. Research shows that the presence of other teens in a car being driven by a teen significantly increases the chances of a crash – whether or not the passengers are explicitly urging the driver to make unsafe traffic maneuvers.
- The second cause is *biological*, an issue of brain development. Recent advances in neuroscience tell us that key parts of the brain's decision-making circuitry do not fully develop until the mid-20s. So, in actual driving situations, teens may weigh the consequences of unsafe driving quite differently than adults do. This, combined with the increased appetite for novelty and sensation that most teens experience at the onset of puberty, makes teens more disposed to risk-taking behind the wheel – often with deadly results.

And as might be expected, these two root causes, the social and the biological, combine and reinforce each other in actual driving situations, leading teens to develop *attitudes* toward driving that increase the likelihood of accidents. As the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety reported in March 2004, teens'

“attitudes seem to be largely unaffected by [conventional safe-driving] programs – and attitudes strongly influence how driving skills and knowledge are put to use.”

NEW RESEARCH APPROACH BRINGS DEEPER INSIGHTS

It’s true that much of what we learned during the course of our research is disturbing, but there’s also a good deal that gives reason for hope. Our focus-group discussions showed, for example, that teens are aware that driving is a weighty responsibility, and their exhilaration for this long-awaited freedom brings with it a tinge of nervousness or fear. Also, the “don’t drink and drive” message has gotten through loud and clear.

But still, teens do not consider driving to be dangerous per se. They are much more focused on the benefits of driving than on the perils, and they voice skepticism that traditional methods of instruction, including driving school and driver’s ed, will influence their behavior or that of their peers. When pressed about the consequences of unsafe driving, their top concerns are losing their driving privileges, harming themselves or others, and incurring financial loss by damaging vehicles or other property.

Here, in brief, are some of our key findings:

- **It’s them, not me.** Most teens say they are good drivers, and that it’s *other* teens who drive “recklessly, distractedly, cluelessly.” They add, however, that speeding is part of the daily driving experience, that “everyone does it.” Although they know that it is not smart to ride with a reckless driver, they are not always willing to challenge or criticize another teen who they believe is driving unsafely. Similarly, they know that driver distractions – both inside and outside the vehicle – pose the biggest threat to safety, but they are reluctant to give up cell phones, music, and other things that can tax a driver’s concentration.
- **Drawn to risk-taking.** A large majority (74 percent) of our online survey participants recognize that driving is a serious responsibility, but many of them say they routinely engage in risky driving behavior. Fifty-five percent said they sometimes exceed the speed limit by more than 10 miles an hour, and 40 percent said they would speed in the coming year. Twenty-one percent said they have ridden in a car driven by a peer who had been drinking.



Despite the proliferation of teen safe-driving programs, teen fatalities in the United States have remained at about the same level for the past 10 years.

- **Good and bad peer pressure.** The survey also confirmed that peers are a major influence – both positive and negative. Nearly half said they are sometimes distracted by passengers (47 percent), and nearly as many said they drive more safely without friends in the car (44 percent). Nonetheless, more than half (53 percent) said friends would be the most effective influence in getting them to drive more safely.

WHAT YOU'LL FIND INSIDE

In this report, The Allstate Foundation presents its detailed findings and makes recommendations for reducing teen fatalities and injuries on the roads.

The first section of this report, **“Over 5,000 Deaths a Year: The Facts About Teen Driving”** (pp. 11-13), gives a statistical overview of the problem. Here we've gathered and summarized the often alarming facts and figures, and we identify the kinds of conditions and circumstances in which teens are most likely to be involved in car crashes. This section includes a state-by-state breakdown of traffic deaths among 16- and 17-year-olds during the two-year span of 2002-2003 (the most recent available data).

“Root Causes: Social Pressure, Brain Development, and the Attitudes They Breed” (pp. 15-27) presents the results of focus-group research and a national survey commissioned by the Foundation in an attempt to discover the underlying attitudes among teens that might influence them toward unsafe driving. We found that teens are most receptive to safe-driving messages during the period when they are learning to drive. Also – and it may come as a surprise to some – we found that teens appear to understand traffic laws and the importance of following them about as well as adults do. It's when teens are actually behind the wheel that social pressures and the exhilaration of newfound freedom often lead to risky behavior.

“Root Causes” also includes reports by two experts who provide a scientific context for what we discovered in our focus groups and national survey. Laurence Steinberg, Ph.D., a professor of psychology at Temple University, describes how the intellectual, emotional, and social dimensions of brain function develop at different rates from one another, and according to different timetables. That fact, combined with the social pressures all teens experience, renders teens more prone than adults to risk-taking behavior.

Also enlightening is the report by Jay Giedd, M.D., chief of brain imaging in the Child Psychiatry Branch of the National Institute of Mental Health. Dr. Giedd describes the key physical differences between adolescent and adult brains as revealed by magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) technology. He finds, among other things, that the human brain matures over a much longer period than previously thought, and has a remarkable ability to modify its structure in response to environmental pressures. This last

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characteristic can be both good and bad. While the brain’s “plasticity” often stimulates learning, creativity, and energy, Dr. Giedd observes, it also can lead to dangerous missteps and trial-and-error until around age 25.

“Current Teen-Driver Efforts: A Wide-Angle View” (pp. 29-43) looks at the strengths and limitations of typical teen-driver safety programs available to young drivers today. We’ve found that most traditional driver-education programs go only so far, providing teens with information and instruction but stopping short of addressing the underlying attitudes that influence how teens drive.

For example, despite advances in driving-simulator technology and the availability of sophisticated simulator programs like DriveSafety in Orem, Utah, and The Safe America Foundation based in Marietta, Georgia, we believe two key questions remain unanswered: First, how effective are driver simulators for training teen drivers and assessing their driving performance? And second, does simulator training make teens safer drivers, and has there been any reduction in traffic crashes, injuries, and fatalities among teens that can be attributed to this training?

We also note that the public awareness campaigns sponsored by state and federal government agencies, corporations, non-profits, and parent organizations have not changed significantly in the last 20 years. Often these programs focus most of their attention on drunk driving – a serious problem but one that accounts for less than 25 percent of all teen crash fatalities.

One of the most promising developments in the last 10 years has been the introduction of graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws. In fact, during the last decade, every state has implemented some form of graduated licensing. GDL laws have cut fatal crashes involving 16-year-old drivers by 26 percent nationally. That’s progress, and it’s heartening – but it’s only a beginning. As the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reported in 2002, “Although GDL has reduced the number of teen fatalities, highway accidents continue to be the leading cause of death for this age group.” In fact, GDL laws across the country are inconsistent and often weak, and those we must look to as the primary enforcers of GDL laws – parents – may not be fully aware of them.

Finally, **“Where Do We Go From Here? Recommendations and Program Goals”** (pp. 45-49) summarizes our view of the problem and makes a number of recommendations for reducing teen traffic fatalities and injuries. These include strengthening the GDL laws that every state has already adopted and the development of grass-roots programs that teens themselves have a hand in shaping. This section includes a report by Peter Zollo, president of Teenage Research Unlimited (TRU), who offers valuable guidance about how best to reach teens with messages and programs designed to make them safer drivers.

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The evidence tells us that making a difference in teen driving safety requires an effort that, at a minimum, includes elements such as:

- **Teen participation** – Teens have told us loud and clear that the best way to effectively address this attitudinal challenge and generate a genuine dialogue among teens is by letting them shape the program and search for solutions themselves. To that end, The Allstate Foundation will convene a panel of teen advisers from different walks of life throughout the country, and hold a series of teen conferences to help shape our program's specific components.
- **Grassroots empowerment** – Teens we interviewed told us that safe driving messages would have more impact if they came from or with a connection to people in their own schools and communities. With more than half of the teens we surveyed telling us that they had already been in a crash, real teens and real parents – and real and often tragic examples – are likely to have an impact that instructional videos and generic scare tactics simply cannot. One element of The Allstate Foundation program will provide local advocates tools to help them reach their peers and to make a difference in their local communities.
- **Rigorous measurement and accountability** – The limitation of many a well-intentioned teen-driver program is the lack of a way of measuring success. Consequently, it is difficult to know which programs are most effective, which should be expanded or replicated and which should be modified or replaced. Building measurability and accountability into teen safe-driving initiatives will help make that possible. The Allstate Foundation will use research both to guide the development of effective strategies and tactics and also to constantly measure our progress. We will also encourage the growing number of community organizations and individuals focused on teen driving to incorporate research and measurement into their own programs wherever possible.

ONLY ONE MEASURE REALLY COUNTS

Of course, the ultimate measure of success will be the steady decline of teen crashes, fatalities, and injuries over a sustained period of time. We understand that many factors beyond our control influence the national crash rate, but we're encouraged by evidence pointing to teen-driver attitudes as an area of untapped potential for bringing those numbers down.

To that end, The Allstate Foundation and its partners begin a long-term commitment to building a strong, attitude-based teen-driver safety program that launches in early 2006. With a 10-year commitment of support from The Allstate Corporation, we hope to build a program that meets teenagers on their terms and in their language. A program that will inspire them to drive safer, first and foremost by re-examining the way they think about driving. A program that will finally begin to loosen this killer's grip on the teenage population.



A PARENT'S PERSPECTIVE

On July 30, 2004, my life changed forever. My 18-year-old son Brett and his best friend Andy were out driving on Cuba Road, a long crest-filled road notorious for speeding, in Long Grove, Illinois. As Andy picked up the speed to 112 mph, Brett turned to him and said, “I trust you, Shorty,” and in a matter of minutes, Andy lost control of the car as it became airborne and crashed between two trees. Andy was ejected from the car through the windshield and survived the crash. Brett, knocked unconscious from the impact to the windshield, was flown by helicopter to the local trauma center. He underwent emergency brain surgery and survived for only six days.

I desperately needed a reason for why this crash took place, and at first I was baffled. The car Andy was driving had all the right safety features. Both boys had driver’s education and were considered by many to be good drivers. Neither drugs nor alcohol was involved. It’s true that the graduated licensing laws in Illinois are relatively weak, but I soon saw that the main cause was the attitudes of two invincible-feeling boys, and how the peer pressure at work between them whet their appetite for risk-taking. The boys were just out to have fun. That realization led me to form Brakes for Brett, a non-profit organization to educate teen drivers on the hazards of reckless driving.

Andy showed complete remorse immediately following the crash. His only concern was for Brett. In the hospital Andy kept on saying, “I killed my best friend and I don’t deserve to live.” Our family went to bat for Andy, especially knowing that it could have just as easily been Brett in the driver’s seat that night, and convinced the prosecutor and the judge not to sentence Andy to jail time. Instead he’ll work with me to educate teens about the realities of reckless driving. By June 2005, we had talked with over 18,000 high school students.

Every year, over 5,000 teens die in vehicle crashes, many due to speeding and reckless driving. I tell teens that I don’t want them in a hospital bed in the intensive care unit with their parents holding their hand, rubbing their forehead and giving them permission to die.

Judging by the emails and letters that I receive, we’re getting through to some of them. We’re working to change their attitudes towards driving and ensuring they realize that their lives and those of their friends are their responsibility and can easily be lost.

—Michael Karlin



A BEST FRIEND AND DRIVER'S PERSPECTIVE

Let me start by telling you what kind of person Brett was. Brett was the type of person that could light up any situation. He could turn a horrible day or moment into a good one. You could never stay mad at Brett, no matter what the circumstances were. He had this glow – this feeling he gave off every time you were around him. He was the best friend anyone could have asked for. Brett was loyal, truthful, and always there for the ones who cared about him.

The day of the accident Brett had been home ill. I remember walking in and he was eating pizza, telling me he had three hot showers and was feeling better. He was ready to go. Our roommate had let us borrow his new 2004 Honda Accord to go by a buddy's house to say hi. Compared to my Cavalier, it was like having a Cadillac. As we drove over there with XM radio blasting, we turned onto Cuba Road where Brett's friend lived. I waited for the other cars to pass and then we were off. I accelerated and the car started reaching speeds of nearly 100 mph. Brett looked at me and said, "I trust you, Shorty," and clicked his seat belt. We became airborne at 112 mph and the adrenaline kicked in — it was all happening so fast that I didn't know how to react. The next thing I knew the car slammed between two trees, and sparks were flying up all around the car.

I passed out, and when I woke up I was confused. I was standing on the other side of the road, on the phone with my girlfriend. I didn't know what was going on or where I was or how I got there. I was trying so hard to figure out how I got to this dark road, but I couldn't remember. I looked down and noticed I had no shoes on. They had been ripped from my feet when I was thrown through the windshield. My yellow shirt was now red. I touched my face to see if that was where the blood was coming from, but sure enough I felt nothing but skin. I turned around and saw Brett with his arm hanging out of the window and head leaning towards the dashboard. I ran to him screaming his name and yelling for him to get out of the car. He never once looked up at me or responded.

I was taken away in an ambulance with the paramedics cutting through my clothes and asking a million questions. After getting 32 stitches at the hospital and taking a trip to the Lake County jail, I was released on bond to go home. I was scared and confused, and pieces of the night before were missing. Later that day I went to visit Brett knowing he had gone through brain surgery and not knowing how his parents were going to react. I was scared out of my mind. Luckily, for me, they weren't mad at me but at the situation.

Six days later, my best friend could not overcome the injuries and died. What had happened turned my life upside down. As much as I hate to admit it, I am still not over it. I don't think I will be for a while. This is a wound that I haven't experienced before, and I don't know how to heal. In the past six months or so, I have gone to talk to high school students to tell my story. It has really taken its toll on me. I am now trying to look at the good I have done and move forward one day at a time.

—Andy Short



Motor vehicle crashes claim over 5,000 teen lives annually. It's almost as if the September 11 terrorist attacks happened twice every year.