

Young Male Drivers Are Found Most Responsible for Fatal Auto Crashes

Highlights Of The Study

Principal findings of the Institute's research study on driver responsibility include the following:

- Young drivers up to about age 25, especially 16- and 17-year-olds, are more often responsible for their fatal crashes and resulting deaths than are older drivers. Young male drivers are more likely than young females to be responsible for their fatal crashes.
- Teenaged drivers are responsible for more deaths per license holder than drivers of all other ages; they are responsible for about five times as many crash deaths per license holder as drivers aged 35-64.
- Teenaged male drivers have by far the highest rates of involvement in crash deaths, and deaths for which they are responsible. Per license holder, male teenaged drivers kill more than four times as many people as female teenaged drivers.
- Male teenaged drivers were involved in 84 percent of the 6,086 studied passenger vehicle occupant deaths in 1978 for which teenagers were probably responsible. Female teenagers accounted for 16 percent.
- Teenaged drivers more often kill other people than themselves. For example, more than half the people killed by teenagers in 1978 were their own passengers, or drivers and passengers in other vehicles, whereas the majority of people killed by drivers aged 21 or older were themselves.

Not only are young drivers involved in a disproportionate share of fatal crashes, they also are responsible for a large share of those crashes, a new study by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety indicates.

This is especially true of teenaged male drivers, the Institute's researchers said; per license holder they were found to kill more than four times as many people as teenaged female drivers. Teenaged drivers as a whole are found at fault for more deaths per license holder than drivers of any other age group.

Involvement Greatest for Teens

Institute research announced a year ago found that young drivers were involved in fatal crashes to an unusual degree, with more deaths per licensed driver associated with crashes of teenaged drivers than with any other age. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 16, No. 14, Sept. 23, 1981.) But that report did not deal with responsibility for those crashes.

In the new study, Institute researchers, using data from the Department of Transportation for 1978, analyzed fatal crashes involving a single passenger car or two passenger cars. Drivers in single-vehicle crashes were assumed to have been responsible for the crash. In two-vehicle crashes, the code on related factors reported by investigating officers was used to assign probable crash responsibility.

Young and Old Most at Fault

Considering both the single-vehicle and two-vehicle crashes, more than 75 percent of drivers under 25 years or 70 years or older were found probably responsible for the fatal crashes in which they were involved. For two-vehicle fatal crashes, 50 percent or more of drivers aged 26 or less and 60 or older were probably responsible.

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“Although elderly drivers rival teenagers in the extent to which they are probably responsible for the fatal crashes in which they are involved, they are involved in many fewer fatal crashes,” the Institute researchers said.

Sixteen-year-old drivers were found most likely to be responsible for fatal crashes, followed by 17-year-olds. Of the 1,011 fatal crashes analyzed involving 16-year-old drivers, 86 percent of those drivers were thought to be responsible.

Contrasts Between Sexes

Sharp contrasts were found between sexes in crash responsibility. Among young drivers and extending to about age 55, men were more likely than women to be responsible for their fatal crashes. Among elderly drivers, women were more likely than men to be responsible. Of the 6,086 occupant deaths studied for

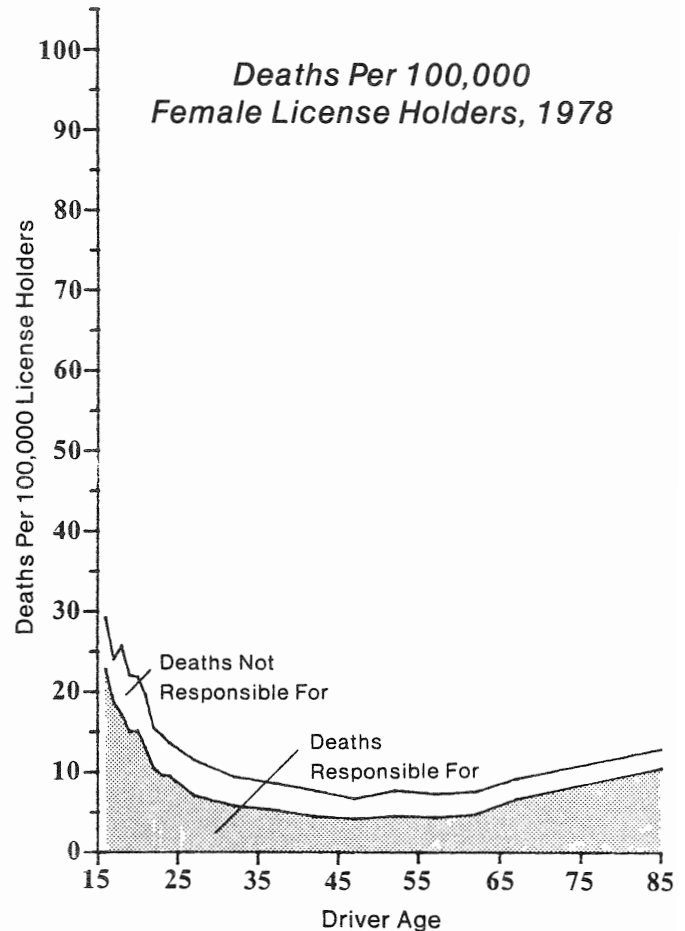
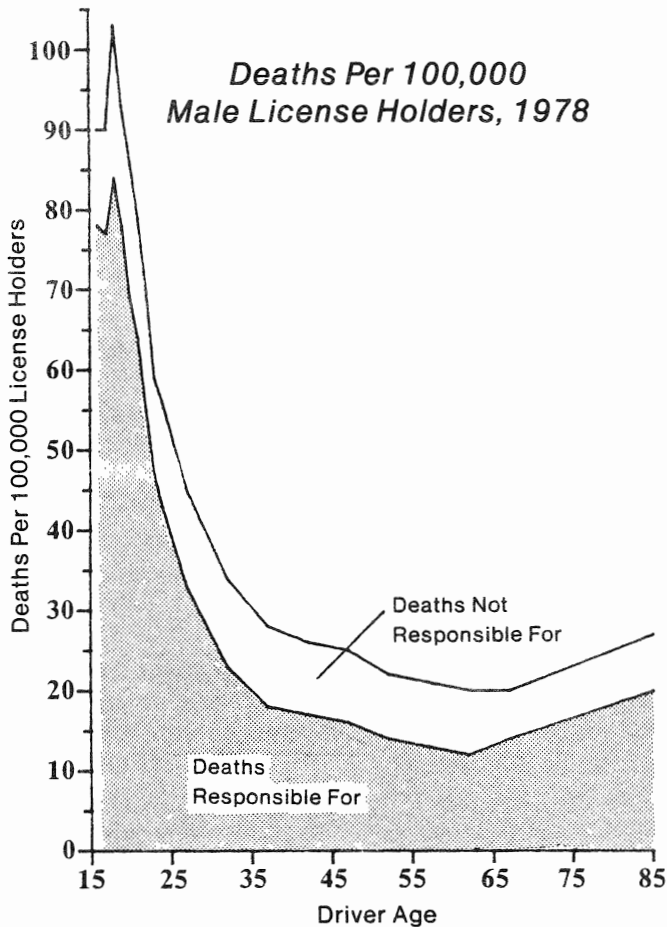
which 16-19-year-old drivers were probably responsible, male drivers were involved in 84 percent and female drivers in 16 percent.

“Although the reasons for the greater likelihood of young males to be responsible for their fatal crashes are not fully known, they are probably more aggressive drivers than females, and they are more likely to drive after consuming alcohol and/or other drugs,” said the researchers.

Deaths of Others Noted

Especially noticeable in the crash data was the fact that the deaths for which teenaged drivers were considered responsible were more often the deaths of others than their own. More than half of the deaths for which the teenaged drivers were probably responsible were those of their own passengers or of the drivers and passengers in other vehicles.

Copies of the study, “Teenaged Drivers and Fatal Crash Responsibility, A Preliminary Report” by Allan F. Williams and Ronald S. Karpf, are available from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, Watergate 600, Washington, D.C. 20037.



DOT Joins Auto Makers In Challenging Court Ruling on Restraints

The Department of Transportation (DOT), which has been ordered by a federal court to require automatic restraints in all new cars starting with 1984 models, has appealed that order to the Supreme Court. Thus the department joins auto makers and conservative advocacy groups in appealing the court-ordered restoration of the Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standard (FMVSS) 208 requirement.

The government's appeal includes these arguments:

- That the DOT had the right to revoke a safety standard when changed circumstances "leave substantial uncertainty that the rule will produce the benefits on which its initial promulgation was premised."
- That "implementation of the passive restraint requirements could adversely affect the public attitude about safety," leading to "a more far-reaching hostility to other safety initiatives."
- That the appeals court had "impermissibly usurped to itself" DOT powers when it issued specific timetables for compliance rather than remanding the issue to the agency for further determination.

It was nearly a year ago that the department's National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) rescinded the automatic restraint standard which had been announced in 1977 to take effect with 1982 models and was later postponed until 1983 models. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 16, No. 17, Nov. 5, 1981.) NHTSA contended that circumstances had changed since the standard was issued and that auto makers planned to meet it by using a detachable automatic belt that was no better than today's manual belt.

The rescission was challenged by State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. and the National Association of Independent Insurers. Responding, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia sharply disagreed with what it called the agency's "arbitrary and capricious" action. The court ordered the standard reinstated, giving NHTSA until October 1 to tell the court if the 1984 model deadline is "achievable." (See *Status Report*, Vol. 17, No. 11, Aug. 12, 1982.)

The government's petition to the Supreme Court for a writ of certiorari was the third appeal to be filed. Earlier, the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association and the Automobile Importers Association had joined

Fewer Claim Belt Use

Self-reported use of automobile seat belts has dropped more than a third in the last 10 years, a nationwide sampling by the Gallup Poll reports.

Of those questioned by the pollsters in a July survey, 17 percent claimed to have used their seat belts the last time they were in the car. (Observed use of seat belts has been reported at 11 percent.) A decade ago, 28 percent claimed to have used their belts on their last car trip.

Of the 1,518 participants in the survey, there was agreement that 40 percent of traffic fatalities would not have occurred if the victims had worn seat belts, yet the majority opposed mandatory belt use. Only 19 percent said they favored a law to fine a person for not wearing seat belts, while 75 percent opposed it and 6 percent had no opinion.

in one appeal, and Consumer Alert and the Pacific Legal Foundation joined in a second. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 17, No. 12, Sept. 2, 1982.) All four of these groups had intervened in the Court of Appeals case.

State Farm and the NAIH have 30 days to file briefs with the Supreme Court, arguing against issuance of the writ. There is no restriction on when the Supreme Court must respond to the petitions. However, some indication that an early decision might be made came in the order from Chief Justice Warren Burger in which he refused a 30-day delay in the government's appeal and granted only a one-week extension of the deadline. If four justices agree to hear the case, the records will be called up from the Court of Appeals for review by the full court.

Congressman Asks Study Of 'Military Jeep' Safety

Saying there is "persuasive evidence that a significant problem exists," the chairman of the House Armed Forces Committee has referred charges that "military jeeps" are involved in a disproportionate number of crashes to the Investigations Subcommittee.

Rep. Melvin Price (D.-Ill.) informed Rep. Mario Biaggi (D.-N.Y.) of his decision, following Biaggi's recent public call for hearings on the issue.

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Committee Recommends Cut in NHTSA Funds

The House Appropriations Committee has recommended sharply lower funding levels for the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's (NHTSA) operations and research starting October 1 and substantial increases for state and community highway safety grants.

The committee recommended a total program of \$170 million, \$2.6 million more than the amounts provided in the current fiscal year and \$11.4 million more than the President requested last winter. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 17, No. 5, April 1, 1982).

A total of \$70 million was recommended for NHTSA's operations and research budget, \$4.9 million less than was appropriated in fiscal 1982 and \$11.6 million less than the administration requested. If adopted, the bill would set aside \$100 million for state and community highway safety grants, \$7.5 million more than the current funding level and \$23 million over the administration request. The additional \$23 million would be directed toward drunk driving countermeasures.

The late Rep. Adam Benjamin (D.-Ill.), chairman of the appropriations subcommittee on transportation, signed the report accompanying H.R. 7019, the bill appropriating funds for the Department of Transportation.

The report contains unusually detailed directions on how some program funds are to be spent and admonishes NHTSA that it may not deviate from the directions without written approval from both the House and Senate appropriations committees.

Here's what was recommended:

Rulemaking Programs - The committee recommended \$5 million for fiscal 1983, or \$1.073 million below NHTSA's budget request and \$985,000 less than the current spending level. The rulemaking offices develop and recommend safety performance test procedures, devices, test criteria, and standards for vehicles and equipment. Since 1981, no significant new rulemaking effort has been undertaken and rulemaking efforts have been aimed at deregulation rather than increased regulation.

In addition, the rulemaking office administers NHTSA's new car assessment program. The committee directed NHTSA to give "high priority ... to continuing and expanding" the program which has been testing new cars in 35 mph front and rear crashes. The agency is required by Congress to disseminate the information garnered in the crash tests to consumers.

Enforcement Programs - The committee recommended \$9.8 million be set aside for NHTSA enforcement programs, some \$371,000 below the budget request but \$95,000 over the 1982 funding level. The enforcement offices ensure manufacturer compliance with federal motor vehicle safety standards and fuel economy standards, and investigate safety-related defects and monitor odometer fraud.

Highway Safety Programs - For fiscal 1983, the committee recommended \$8.9 million be set aside for highway safety programs, \$822,000 below the administration request and \$1.52 million less than the current funding level.

The primary role of this program is to provide salaries and expenses for headquarters and regional office staff who help the states execute their own highway safety programs. Funding is also set aside for contract projects for developing and demonstrating specific safety programs.

Much of NHTSA's funding for implementing its safety belt use promotional campaign is derived from this program category and highway safety research program funds. The committee set specific, detailed guidelines for distribution of these funds. Among the funds set aside are a recommended \$1 million for the National Driver Register and \$200,000 for developing model traffic records systems.

The committee also noted that NHTSA expects to spend \$9.665 million on its seat belt use program by the end of fiscal 1983 and commented, "In view of NHTSA's lack of success in similar campaigns, the committee has deep reservations about the ultimate effectiveness of the current seat belt usage program."

Research and Analysis - The committee recommended \$31.3 million for NHTSA's research and analysis programs, \$7 million below the budget request and \$4 million under the current funding level. Of this, \$6.5 million would be set aside for administrative and salary expenses and \$24.8 million for research contracts and data collection.

Separately, the committee said it was "concerned about the judgment exhibited in NHTSA's issuance of a sole-source, noncompetitive contract 'to study the feasibility of establishing a nonprofit foundation to support, enhance, and augment a national educational and advocacy mission to significantly reduce the number of deaths and injuries on the nation's highways.'"

The appropriations bill will next go to the House floor for a vote. Once adopted, it will be referred to the Senate for consideration.

The Airbag Cometh

It's the law of the land. Unless they are spared by an eleventh-hour stay from the Supreme Court, auto manufacturers will be required to build automatic restraint systems into their 1984 models.

The big question now is whether Detroit will meet the standard at minimum cost with inconvenient belt systems or shift to the superior but costlier "airbag" restraints. What's best for the country's drivers would probably also be best for General Motors. But Government may have to nudge the automakers in the right direction.

The debate over how best to save lives in high-speed car accidents has been waged for two decades. Shoulder and lap belt combinations work fairly well. But less than 15 percent of all drivers buckle up, and safety experts have been pushing for more than a decade for "passive" systems that work even without the cooperation of the motorist.

Auto safety officials in the last four Administrations wanted either shoulder-lap belts that closed automatically or electronically triggered airbags that cushioned the shock in collisions. The auto companies, opposing *all* costly regulation, successfully stalled the law. The stall seemed to have paid off when the Reagan Administration decided that passive restraints, too, would be sabotaged by drivers and were thus not worth the cost.

But a Federal court quickly reversed that judgment, ruling that the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration had loaded the regulatory dice. By October 1983, it said, all new cars must come with passive restraints.

If, as is likely, Big Auto loses its final appeal, there'll be no rescue from Congress. The Senate is already on record against the automakers' stall. It is time, therefore, to shift the debate to what sort of passive restraints are best.

Belts that grab you whether you like it or not, like those that now come as standard equipment with VW Rabbits, have the virtue of very low cost. Airbags are less obtrusive, and work much better in high-speed crashes. But it costs a lot of money to gear up for airbag production; on just a few thousand cars a year, they would be very expensive. So unless Detroit decides to put airbags in several hundred thousand cars a year, only the affluent and most frightened drivers will be tempted to buy them.

One hope for airbag fans is that foreign competition will force them on American manufacturers. Mercedes-Benz, which advertises airbags in Europe as "a good idea whose time has come," says it will meet the American requirement with airbags. Japanese companies may follow suit, embarrassing Detroit with another marketing coup.

Recent history shows that American automakers can't be relied on to pursue even their own enlightened self-interest. Better, then, to offer them an incentive in the form of a short delay — one year perhaps — if they agree in return to equip, say, a quarter of all new cars with airbags rather than passive belts. The deal could be arranged in court or with Congress.

Airbags can save tens of thousands of lives. And the more we make, the lower the cost. What are we waiting for?

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Congressman Asks Study Of 'Military Jeep' Safety (Cont'd from Page 3)

Biaggi said a recent Defense Department study prepared at his request showed that between 1979 and 1981 there were more than 2,800 crashes involving "military jeeps." The crashes resulted in more than 1,300 injuries and 54 fatalities, Biaggi said.

In a separate study of 1979 "military jeep" crashes prepared by the Army Safety Center and released by Biaggi, investigators found that 25 percent of the 902 reported crashes resulted in rollovers.

In a letter to Biaggi, Sharon B. Lord, a deputy assistant Secretary of Defense, said the study of 1979 crashes showed that "jeep-type vehicles are designed for off-the-road tactical operations but are frequently used on the road where they do not handle as well as commercial vehicles. As a consequence," she added, "jeeps are involved in significantly more overturning type accidents."

The quarter-ton utility (jeep-type) vehicles are built under specifications set by the military and have been produced by a number of manufacturers. They are not the same vehicle as the AMC Jeep CJ-5 and CJ-7 series produced for commercial sale, although the CJ-5 also has been studied for rollover tendencies. (See *Status Report*, Vol. 16, No. 19, Dec. 9, 1981.)

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