

Teenage Drivers and Alcohol Use

by
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Motor vehicle crashes are the number one killer of teenagers. Nearly half of all deaths of 16-19 year olds are produced by injuries sustained in crashes. Teenagers 16-19 years old comprised 8 percent of the U.S. population in 1977 and 9 percent of all licensed drivers, but they accounted for 17 percent of all motor vehicle-related fatalities (17,18). Alcohol long has been known to be an important factor in fatal crashes involving teenaged drivers.

Four key facts summarize existing knowledge concerning teenaged drivers and alcohol use:

1. Teenagers drink and drive less often than older (excluding elderly) drivers. When they do drink and drive, teenagers tend to have lower blood alcohol concentrations (BACs). These findings are based on U.S. and Canadian studies of non-crash-involved drivers who were stopped for roadside surveys or who were driving at the same time of day, day of week, and place as drivers who crashed (1,4,8,10,13,14).
2. In both fatal and nonfatal crashes, teenaged drivers are generally less likely than older drivers to have been drinking. When teenaged drivers in crashes have been drinking, they tend to have lower BACs than older drivers. These relationships consistently have been found in a large number of studies (1,3-5,7,9,12). However, a recent study, based on fatal crashes in Canada, found that teenaged drivers in crashes were more likely than older drivers to have been drinking (6).
3. Teenaged drivers who drink are more likely than older drivers who drink to be involved in crashes. This is true at all BAC levels. Compared to older drivers, teenagers with low and moderate BACs are much more likely to be in crashes (1,2,4,6). Thus, although fewer teenagers than adults drink and drive, teenagers' crash risk is higher when they do drink. This is generally thought to be due to the relative inexperience of teenagers with drinking, and with driving after drinking.
4. Lowering the minimum drinking age increases the involvement of teenaged drivers in alcohol-related fatal crashes (15). Raising the drinking age reduces such involvement (11,16).

Notes

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