

INSURANCE INSTITUTE FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY

NEWS RELEASE

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DRIVER DEATH RATE AMONG 16 YEAR-OLDS HAS NEARLY DOUBLED WHILE GOING DOWN AMONG OTHER DRIVERS, EVEN 17-19 YEAR-OLDS

ARLINGTON, VA – The overall driver death rate declined during 1975-96 from 15 to 12 per 100,000 licensed drivers. But among 16 year-olds, the death rate was trending upward, and this trend was more extreme. The rate increased among 16-year-old drivers from 19 per 100,000 in 1975 to 35 per 100,000 licensed drivers in 1996, and the increase occurred among both males and females.

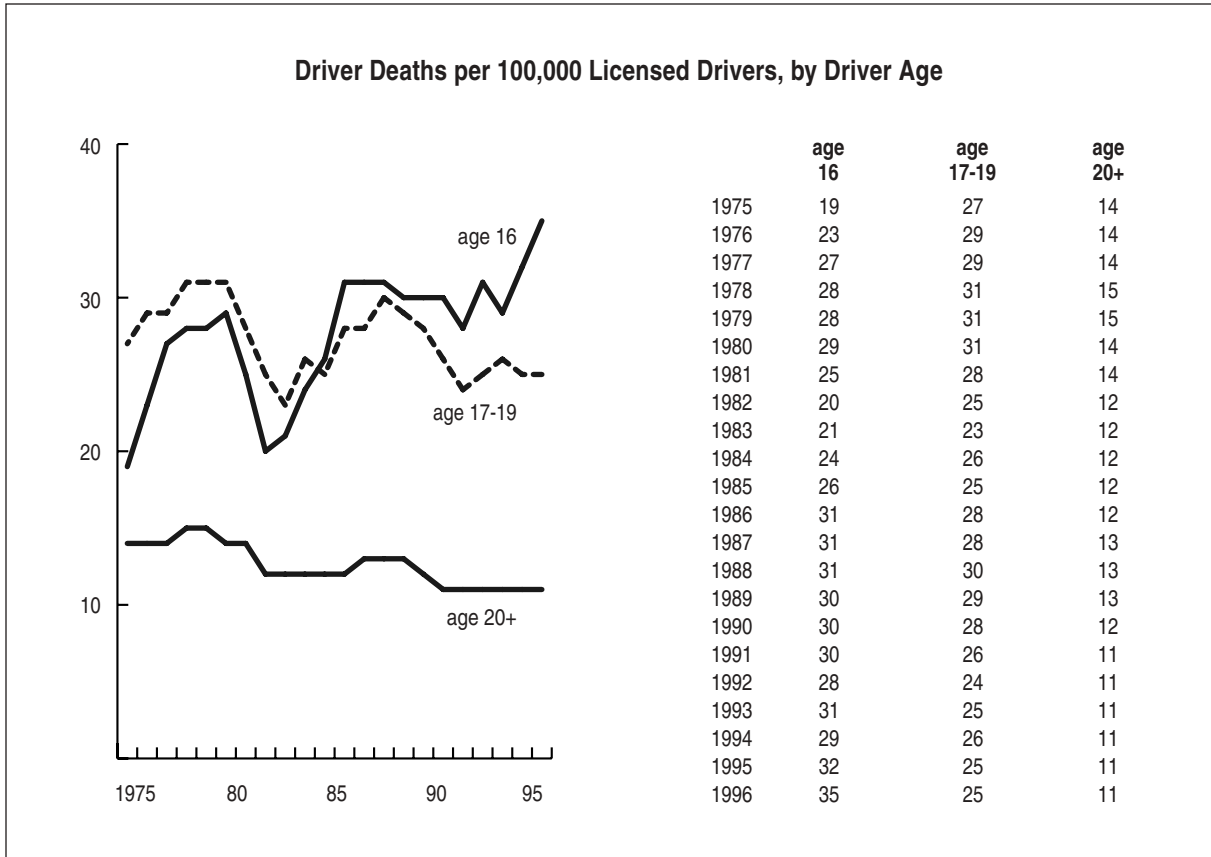
16 Year-Olds Compared with 17-19 Year-Olds

Death rates didn't increase among all teenage drivers, just 16 year-olds. Between 1975 and 1984, the driver death rate among 17-19 year-olds was higher than among 16 year-olds. But as the rate declined slightly among older teenagers and increased among 16 year-olds, a crossover occurred (see attached graph). "Since the mid-1980s, the death rate among 16 year-olds has been higher, and this gap is widening," explains Allan Williams, senior vice president of the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. "So it's misleading to lump all teenage drivers together and talk about the problem of fatal crashes in this group as a whole. The rates differ a lot within the group we call teenagers."

The driver death rate among 17-19 year-olds declined from 27 per 100,000 licensed drivers in 1975 to 25 in 1996. This rate still is substantially higher than among drivers 20+ years old but not nearly as high as among 16 year-olds.

Absolute numbers of deaths as well as death rates "present an alarming picture for 16 year-olds," Williams says. The number of 16-year-old driver deaths increased about 50 percent during 1975-96 (from 362 to 547 annually) while deaths

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among 17-19 year olds declined 27 percent (from 2,611 to 1,894). "Any way you look at it, 16-year-old drivers represent a growing problem," Williams adds.

Data aren't available to assess why the death rate for the youngest drivers is going up while rates are trending down among older drivers, even older teenagers. "The most plausible hypothesis is that 16 year-olds are driving more in high-risk circumstances – at night for example – than they used to compared with 17-19 year-olds. Maybe 16 year-olds are getting easier access to cars than they used to," Williams says, adding "it might be tempting to associate the problem of 16-year-

old drivers with the decline in high school driver education programs. But this almost certainly isn't the case because research shows driver ed doesn't affect the crash experience of beginning drivers."

Population Shift Means Problem Will Worsen

The teenage population in the United States declined during most of the years researchers studied (1975-96). But beginning in the early 1990s, the population of 16 year-olds began increasing and will continue going up through the next decade.

"This means the problem of deaths among 16-year-old drivers isn't going to go away. It's going to get even worse unless corrective action is taken," Williams says.

How Graduated Licensing Works

A promising way to reduce deaths among 16-year-old drivers is to adopt graduated licensing systems that phase in driving privileges in stages as young beginners gain more experience behind the wheel. Since 1996, six states – California, Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, and Ohio – have adopted programs that include essential elements of graduated licensing. Such elements include six months or more in a learning phase, during which supervision is required. Then there's another six months to a year in an intermediate licensing phase, during which unsupervised driving isn't allowed in high-risk situations – for example, at night or with other teens in the car.

"We should be seeing the benefits of these new graduated licensing programs soon," Williams concludes. "But the majority of states still allow quick and easy access to licenses. If we're going to reverse the trend of increasing deaths among 16-year-old drivers, more states need to adopt graduated licensing."

End of 3-page press release on 16-year-old drivers.

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