

Teen Driving: Drugged? Drunk? Distracted?

Fact Sheet

Each day in this country, as many as 9,000 16- and 17-year-old drivers get behind the wheel of a car.¹ With this responsibility comes great risk: Driving-age teenagers have the highest overall crash rates of any age group,² and traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for 15- to 20-year-olds.³ Drugs, alcohol, and driver distractions increase teens' crash risks. As teens take to the roads, parents can take action by talking about the dangers of drunk, drugged, and distracted driving.

Teens are just as likely to drive under the influence of marijuana as alcohol.

- Thirteen percent of high school seniors reported driving under the influence of marijuana, a number nearly equivalent to those who reported driving under the influence of alcohol (14%),⁴ despite higher prevalence of alcohol consumption among teens.⁵
- High school students are more likely to drink, smoke cigarettes, and smoke marijuana in the month immediately after earning their driver's license.⁶
- Thirteen percent of 12th graders reported that they usually smoke marijuana in a car, and eight percent reported that they usually drink beer in a car.⁷
- In 2006, 30 percent of high school seniors reported driving after drinking heavily or using drugs, or riding in a car whose driver had been drinking heavily or using drugs, at least once in the prior two weeks.⁸
- Thirty-eight percent of teens report seeing passengers smoking pot in a car with a teen driver.⁹

Teen drivers admit to engaging in risky driving behaviors, which are more likely to cause crashes.

- Sixty-one percent of 16- and 17-year-olds admitted risky driving habits. Of that 61 percent, nearly 46 percent sent text messages while driving; 51 percent talked on cell phones while driving; 58 percent drove with their friends in the car; and 40 percent exceeded the speed limit by 10 miles per hour or more.¹⁰
- More than one in four teens believes speeding, talking on a cell phone while driving, and not wearing a safety belt are safe.¹¹
- Even with a parent in the car, teens engage in bad driving choices, such as speeding (almost 50% of the time), talking on their cell phones while driving (about 20% of the time), and eating or drinking while driving (almost 20% of the time).¹²
- Across all ages, driver inattention is the main cause of crashes. Nearly 80 percent of crashes and 65 percent of near-crashes involved driver inattention caused by some sort of distraction within three seconds of the event.¹³

Risky driving behaviors are also a concern for Hispanic and African American teens, with both groups reporting driving or riding in a car with an impaired driver.

- Traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for Hispanic driving-age teens, and the second leading cause of death for African American driving-age teens.¹⁴

- According to the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health Center for Injury Research and Policy, African American males ages 13-19 are nearly twice as likely to die in a motor vehicle crash as males in general.¹⁵
- Among youth ages 12-17 in 2006, the rate of current illicit drug use among African Americans was similar to that of white teens (10%), while Hispanic teens reported slightly lower rates (9%) of current use.¹⁶
- Compared to white students, Hispanic 12th graders had lower rates of driving after marijuana use, and black 12th graders had lower rates of driving after drinking heavily. However, both Hispanic 12th graders and black 12th graders were just as likely as white 12th graders to report driving or riding in a car with a driver who had been drinking heavily or using drugs.¹⁷

Parents are the most important influence on their teen when it comes to risky behaviors, including substance abuse and driving. Parents can improve their teen's health and safety by discussing the dangers of using drugs or alcohol at any time, setting a good example behind the wheel, establishing driving rules and consequences, teaching them to eliminate distractions when operating a motor vehicle, and warning them of the dangers of riding with impaired or distracted drivers.

- Despite what most parents think, teens value their advice. More than half of teens of all ages (57%) say that family, rather than friends or school, is the most important thing in their lives right now.¹⁸
- Teens who report having conversations with their parents about alcohol and drug use are more likely to stay drug-free, compared to teens who do not talk about substance abuse with their parents.¹⁹
- Nearly 60 percent of teens who drive say their parents have the most influence on their driving.²⁰ Yet, teens have reported seeing their own parents talking on a cell phone while driving (62%), speeding (48%), and not wearing a safety belt (31%).²¹
- Sixty-six percent of teens say they care about their parents' opinion on cell phone use while driving.²²
- Teens whose parents enforce penalties for driving law infractions are more likely than teens whose parents do not enforce penalties to wear their safety belts (89% vs. 74%); require their passengers to buckle up (82% vs. 64%); obey stop signs (91% vs. 60%); and use turn signals (89% vs. 76%).²³

References

- ¹ Unpublished estimate derived from U.S. Department of Transportation, Federal Highway Administration, Highway Statistics, October 2006 (Table DL-20: Distribution of Licensed Drivers – 2005 by Sex and Percentage in Each Age Group and Relation to Population).
- ² U.S. Department of Transportation, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, "Traffic Safety Facts: Young Drivers," 2005.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Unpublished estimates derived from U.S. Census Bureau and Monitoring the Future data from O'Malley, Patrick and Johnston, Lloyd, "Unsafe Driving by American High School Seniors, 2001-2006" *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, November 2007. [Data show that 13% of U.S. high school seniors surveyed said they drove after using marijuana and 14% drove under the influence of alcohol. Monitoring the Future data are nationally representative.]
- ⁵ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Illicit Drug Use, September 2007.
- ⁶ McCarthy D.M. and Brown, S.A. Changes in alcohol involvement, cognitions and drinking and driving behavior for youth after they obtain a driver's license," *Journal of Studies on Alcohol*, 65: 289-296, May 2004.
- ⁷ 2005-2006 PRIDE Surveys National Summary, "PRIDE Questionnaire Report for Grades 6 thru 12," September 18, 2006.
- ⁸ Unpublished estimates derived from U.S. Census Bureau and Monitoring the Future data from O'Malley, Patrick and Johnston, Lloyd, "Unsafe Driving by American High School Seniors, 2001-2006" *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, November 2007. [Data show that 13% of U.S. high school seniors surveyed said they drove after using marijuana and 14% drove under the influence of alcohol. Monitoring the Future data are nationally representative.]
- ⁹ The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and State Farm, "Driving: Through the Eyes of Teens National Teen Driver Survey," January 2007.
- ¹⁰ *Seventeen Survey: Are you a dangerous driver? Seventeen*, August 2007.
- ¹¹ Students Against Destructive Decisions and Liberty Mutual Group, "Teen Driving," 2004.
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- ¹³ Virginia Tech Transportation Institute, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, "100-Car Naturalistic Study" June 2005.
- ¹⁴ NHTSA, National Center for Statistics and Analysis, Motor Vehicle Traffic Crashes as a Leading Cause of Death in the U.S., 2002 – A Demographic Perspective, 2005.
- ¹⁵ National Transportation Safety Board, Young African American Drivers, July 2006.
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- ¹⁷ Unpublished estimates derived from U.S. Census Bureau and Monitoring the Future data from O'Malley, Patrick and Johnston, Lloyd, "Unsafe Driving by American High School Seniors, 2001-2006" *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, November 2007.
- ¹⁸ The TRU Study, TRU, Fall '06 Wave.
- ¹⁹ Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2006 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, Illicit Drug Use, September 2007.
- ²⁰ Students Against Destructive Decisions and Liberty Mutual Group, "Teen Driving," 2004.
- ²¹ Ibid.
- ²² The Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and State Farm, "Driving: Through the Eyes of Teens National Teen Driver Survey," January 2007.
- ²³ Students Against Destructive Decisions and Liberty Mutual Group, "Summer Driving," 2007.