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Young Driver Survey

Background

Motor vehicle crashes remain a leading cause of death among young people (Webb, 2018). Although young drivers represented only 5.4% of all licensed drivers in 2016, they represented 8.9% of drivers in fatal crashes (National Center for Statistics and Analysis, 2018). Many factors influence young drivers' risk of crash, including age-related immaturity, lack of experience, and engagement in risky behaviors like speeding and distraction. To better understand these factors and to design more effective countermeasures to address them, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration conducted a survey of the self-reported traffic safety behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs of young drivers.

Methods

Between 2014 and 2017, the research team administered the Young Driver Survey to 17,698 drivers 16 to 21 years old in Florida, Georgia, Massachusetts, Nebraska, and Oklahoma. The survey sample was drawn from Department of Motor Vehicles' databases in these States. Driver license holders 16 to 20 at the time of the sample drawing were eligible to participate. NHTSA received clearance from the Office of Management and Budget to conduct this survey (Control No. 2127-0704).

The research team mailed invitations to participate to 79,883 young drivers, which included a link to the survey website and a \$1 cash incentive. People who did not respond were later offered the option to complete the survey by mail. The research team obtained informed consent from all respondents, including parental consent for those under 18. Respondents received \$10 on completion of the survey. There were two versions of the survey that overlapped but also explored specific topics in depth. Respondents could complete the survey in English or Spanish.

The final sample included 17,698 respondents (Version A, $n = 8,960$; Version B, $n = 8,738$), with a 22% response rate ranging from 13% to 27% across the five States. Survey data were weighted to account for selection probabilities and to align the sample with each State's demographic characteristics (age, sex, and race/ethnicity). Using chi-square tests that accounted for the sample design, the research team evaluated the statistical significance of associations between responses and the independent variables of interest: sex, age (under or over the age of majority: 19 in Nebraska and 18 in the remaining States), and geographic location (rural, urban clusters, or urbanized areas). Per the U.S. Census Bureau, "urban clusters" have populations of at least 2,500 but less than 50,000, "urbanized areas" have populations of over 50,000, and "rural areas" encompass all

remaining space. Results highlighted in this report had a significant difference in responses by category at the $p = .05$ level, with at least a 5% difference between categories.

Results

Seat belts

Most young drivers reported always wearing seat belts while driving (89%) or riding as front seat passengers (82%). Young drivers in urbanized areas (91%) or urban clusters (90%) reported always wearing seat belts when driving more frequently than those in rural areas (79%). By contrast, fewer young drivers reported always wearing seat belts when riding as back seat passengers (57%). Across all seating positions, the most common reason young drivers gave for not wearing seat belts was that they were only going short distances.

Speeding

About half (55%) of young drivers said they never drove 20 mph more or faster than "most other vehicles," while the remaining group reported doing so some (36%), most (6%), or all the time (2%). About half (47%) of young drivers reported being involved in one or more "near misses" in the past month—having to suddenly brake or rapidly steer to avoid a crash. Females (50%) were more likely to report near misses than males (45%). Young drivers in urbanized areas (51%) were more likely to report near misses than those in urban clusters (45%) or rural areas (42%).

Alcohol and Other Drugs

About half (52%) of young drivers reported having at least one alcoholic drink in their lives. However, most (92%) young drivers who drank reported not having driven within 2 hours of drinking in the past month. Of the young drivers who had, 66% reported having three or fewer drinks on all instances of drinking then driving, while the remainder reported having four or more drinks on at least one instance of drinking then driving. Half (51%) of those who reported drinking then driving at least once in the past month said that they had felt buzzed while driving. When considering drugs other than alcohol, most (92%) young drivers reported not driving while feeling "buzzed, sleepy, or disoriented" from drugs in the past month.

Electronic Device Use

About a quarter (23%) of young drivers who have cell phones in the car when they drive said they sometimes read text messages while driving, when the car is moving. Drivers over the age of majority (25%) reported reading texts while driving more frequently than those under the age of majority (17%), as did young drivers in rural areas (27%) versus those in urban

clusters (23%) or urbanized areas (22%). Age and geographic location similarly influenced the percentages of young drivers who reported sending texts (18%) or talking on the phone while driving (23%).

Crashes

A quarter of young drivers reported being involved in one or more crashes. Several risky behaviors were associated with increased reported crash involvement, including frequency of driving after 10 p.m., drinking alcohol, reading or sending text messages while driving, and speeding. Among drivers who reported crashes, 78% were involved in just one, and 91% of that group said they were wearing their seat belts at the time of the crashes.

Law Enforcement

About a quarter (26%) of young drivers reported being stopped by police in the past year. Males (30%) reported being stopped more frequently than females (23%), as did those over the age of majority (31%) versus those under (16%). Young drivers in rural areas (33%) were more likely to report being stopped than those in urban clusters (27%) or urbanized areas (24%). Speeding was the most frequently reported reason for being stopped and ticketed (69%).

Perception of Risk

About half (47%) of young drivers estimated that drivers could take their eyes off the road for 3 or more seconds before it was dangerous. More females (50%) than males (43%) reported 3 or more seconds as the time until it became dangerous. Young drivers in rural areas (56%) were more likely to estimate 3 or more seconds could pass before it became dangerous, compared to 46% of young drivers in both urban clusters and urbanized areas. Depending on the kind of drink (beer, light beer, liquor, wine), 59% to 72% of young drivers said they believed it was safe to drive after three or fewer alcoholic drinks; 21% to 34% said it was safe to drive after four or more drinks.

Road Safety Education

Most young drivers (93%) who said their parents always wore seat belts when driving also reported always wearing seat belts when driving, versus 70% of young drivers who said their parents wore seat belts when driving sometimes, rarely, or never. Young drivers who reported paying more attention to messages in the media about police enforcement of traffic safety laws also reported engaging in several risky behaviors (e.g., sending texts while driving, drinking then driving) less frequently than young drivers who said they paid less attention to these messages.

Discussion

Most young drivers reported safe behaviors like wearing seat belts while driving and refraining from alcohol- or drug-impaired driving. Many young drivers also reported refraining

from speeding or using phones while driving. Nevertheless, some young drivers reported risky behaviors like not wearing seat belts in back seats or reading and sending texts while driving, and young drivers who engaged in risky behaviors more frequently also reported more crashes. The frequency of young drivers' risky or safe behaviors, attitudes, or beliefs often differed between sexes, ages, or geographic locations.

A limitation of this study is that it relies on self-report. Young drivers may have been biased to respond in ways they believed would be viewed favorably by others; this "social desirability bias" may make risky behaviors appear less prevalent than they truly are. However, self-report is a useful way to gather information about attitudes, beliefs, and risky behaviors that are difficult to measure directly. Another limitation is that the research team only sampled respondents from five States, so the results are not necessarily representative of all young drivers in the United States.

Conclusions

Most young drivers report safe traffic safety behaviors, attitudes, and beliefs, sometimes with differences among drivers of different sexes, ages, or geographic locations. Yet, some young drivers report engaging in risky behaviors, and those who do so more frequently also report more crashes. While Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) laws help reduce risk and exposure for all young drivers, these survey findings suggest that additional efforts focused on specific areas of risk for young drivers may improve safety. These efforts may include the GDL component of banning cell phone use by beginning drivers, high-visibility cell phone and text messaging ban enforcement, and communications and outreach to support speed enforcement.

References

- National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (2018, February). *Young drivers: 2016 data* (Traffic Safety Facts. Report No. DOT HS 812 498). Washington, DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
- Webb, C. N. (2018, February). *Motor vehicle traffic crashes as a leading cause of death in the United States, 2015* (Traffic Safety Facts Crash Stats. Report No. DOT HS 812 499). Washington, DC: National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

How to Order

Download the *Young Driver Survey Report* (June 2019, DOT HS 812 761) from the National Transportation Library (<https://ntl.bts.gov>).

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