



## **Opinion-Editorial**

### **Driving the Future:**

#### ***New Legislation Gives Teens a Voice in Traffic Safety Programming***

I am a teenager. I stay up too late; I wake up too late. I get emotional. I don't want my parents circling me like hawks, and I definitely don't want them to try to tell me what to do, especially behind the wheel. However, now that students are falling back into the school routine, it's time for everyone to pay attention to teen safety on the road.

Daily, young people get behind the wheel to go to class, work or extracurricular activities, but if you're a teen driver like me, your odds on the road aren't good. Young drivers are the most dangerous category of driver, to themselves and to everyone else. According to the CDC website, individuals ages 15-24 represent only 14 percent of the U.S. population, but they account for almost 30 percent of the total costs of motor vehicle injuries — leaving them highly overrepresented. In addition, per mile driven, young drivers ages 16-19 are four times more likely than "more experienced" drivers to get in a car crash, and male drivers and passengers ages 15-19 are twice as likely to die in a car crash as females.

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The disproportionate number of teen crashes is the result of several key factors. One of the central reasons is the obvious — lack of experience. Teens are more likely to underestimate risky situations and to be unable to recognize hazardous ones. They are also more likely to drive closer to the vehicle in front of them, reducing their time to react if necessary. Also, because the judgment center of their brains is still developing, teens are more susceptible to the influences of peer pressure and emotion. The likelihood of fatal teen crashes increases as teens add more passengers to their vehicles, which they are more likely to do because they are social animals. Unfortunately, those teen passengers and drivers are also more likely not to be wearing their seatbelts. In 2009, the majority (56 percent) of young people 16 to 20 years old involved in fatal crashes were unbuckled.

Yet despite overwhelming evidence that teen drivers and teen driver safety merit the nation's attention, prior to this year, federal highway safety legislation barely mentioned teens and the federal agency in charge of promoting safe driving behavior on the highways, NHTSA, had spent only 0.2% of its 2010 budget on this high-risk category.

While teen drivers have previously been an overlooked group of motor vehicle operators, the recent passage of the highway bill, the Moving Ahead for Progress in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Act or MAP-21, marked a change in the trend, seriously addressing teen drivers for the first time in legislation. MAP-21 establishes funding for distracted driving, an area that affects teens more than others; and also provides incentives for progressive Graduated Driver's License programs. Most important to me, MAP-21 encourages states to include a peer-

to-peer component in any teen traffic safety program they adopt, acknowledging that teens must be part of the solution for an issue that so directly affects them.

Peer-to-peer efforts, like those provided for in the MAP-21 legislation, are key to the success of any attempt to keep teens safe, as they encourage teens to take an active part in reaching out and touching one another in ways that teens know are effective. My friends and I are not oblivious to the risks we face when behind the wheel, and we are not passive in the fight for safer roads. After all, we're the ones primarily at risk. Thousands of students and many student organizations across the nation, including SADD, are engaged in creating positive change for our generation — working to improve our safety on the road and the safety of everyone else as well. I am grateful that teens themselves are now being recognized as a key part of something as important as traffic safety policy.

I am a teenager. I have things to say. I have thoughts, and ideas, and influence. And I am not alone. I, along with all of my peers, have the power to redefine our generation's safety on the road. We are enthusiastic. We are passionate. And we are leading the way for positive and meaningful change.

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