

## Editorial: What's killing our kids?

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Less than a week after a group of Illinois leaders announced a plan to make new drivers safer, a leading children's hospital and a national insurer released a study aimed at finding out why so many young drivers are killed on the nation's highways.

Consider that the fatality rate for drivers 16 to 19 years, based on miles driven, is four times that of drivers age 25-79, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. In 2005, nearly 7,500 15- to 20-year-old drivers were involved in fatal crashes.

Given those numbers, it might be instructive to find out what young people themselves have to say about their driving safety. Children's Hospital of Philadelphia and State Farm recently combined to conduct the first national young driver survey. Researchers talked to 5,665 students from 68 randomly selected high schools and what they found just may surprise you: Kids themselves recognize that they are very often driving, or riding, under pretty dangerous circumstances. Released Jan. 25, the survey targeted 9th-11th grade students. "Research has told us a lot about which teens get into crashes, but we don't know enough about the why," according to Dr. Flaura K. Winston, M.D., co-scientific director and founder of the Center for Injury Research and Prevention at Philadelphia Hospital said. "With this survey, we asked teens directly: what is happening when your peers drive that is making them unsafe?" Here's what they said:

-- 75 percent see peers driving fatigued;

-- 90 percent see passenger behavior that distracts the driver;

-- An astonishing 50 percent plus reported teens exhibiting road rage.

-- Nine out of 10 teens reported it was common to see teens driving while talking on the cell phone, and seven out of 10 reported seeing a teen driving while emotionally upset while talking on a cell phone.

-- Speeding by teen drivers was observed far more frequently than driving impaired and half of all teens reported driving 10 miles per hour or more over the posted speed limit at least some times.

"Teens described a driving environment that would be challenging even to experienced drivers," Dr. Winston writes. "Combine this driving environment with lack of training and inexperience and you have a deadly mix."

(For more from the study see [www.chop.edu/youngdrivers](http://www.chop.edu/youngdrivers) and [www.statefarm.com](http://www.statefarm.com).)

The good news for parents in the survey is that kids say they play a key role in driving safety. According to the study:

-- 60 percent say that they care about their parents' opinion on cell phone use while driving

-- 50 percent of them rely on parents to learn how to drive.

The situation then, may not as hopeless as it seems. It is possible to make kids safer and there are a host of people searching for how to do it. Officials with State Farm say the timing of the study's release -- days after Secretary of State Jesse White's task force released a list of recommendations for teen drivers -- was purely coincidental, though the groups do support the secretary's efforts.

So do we. Judging by the results of this survey, a great many young people just might, too. Now, let's do something about it.