

# Traffic Safety Facts

## Traffic Tech – Technology Transfer Series

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### Teen Unsafe Driving Behaviors: Focus Group

For 15- to 20-year-olds, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death, accounting for approximately one-third of all deaths for this age group. The high crash-involvement rate for this age is primarily due to teen's lack of maturity and driving experience coupled with their overconfidence and risk-taking behaviors. Some of the high risk behaviors include failure to wear safety belts, speeding, and driving while impaired (by alcohol or other drugs), drowsy, or distracted. Additionally, this age group is particularly susceptible to distractions, including other passengers in the vehicle and electronic devices.

The National Organizations for Youth Safety (NOYS) worked with the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration to identify messages and communication strategies for counteracting these dangerous driving behaviors among teenage motorists and passengers between the ages of 15 and 18.

#### Methods

To provide geographic and ethnic diversity, focus group discussion took place in four cities: Fort Lee, NJ; Seattle, WA; Minneapolis, MN; Atlanta, GA. Screeners were used to recruit participants. Focus groups addressed the following research issues: 1) Explanations for behaviors and which behaviors are most amenable to modifications; 2) Message themes that would be most effective and well received; 3) Delivery mechanisms participants recommend NHTSA and its partner organizations consider given the diversity of the target population.

#### Findings

Some of the highlights of findings from the Teen Driver Focus Group include:

- **Driver Licensing:** The focus group participants did not like the restrictions placed on their driving. However, when pressed most did acknowledge that the programs were probably a good idea for brand new drivers.

- **Impaired Driving:** In all four cities, focus group participants reported having no memory of any drunk-driving related messages. They reported that they felt bombarded with anti-marijuana ads, which they discounted as being "lame." Additionally, most participants believed that marijuana does not impair their driving. They also did not see anything wrong with underage drinking, and saw very little

wrong with driving after having consumed a beer or two. While judgment is often impaired when driving, many teens believed that they could tell when they are too drunk to drive.

- **Enforcement:** When asked about enforcement, many focus group participants reported that they could get out of getting a ticket by begging, crying, or being nice. One teen reported that he was in a car driven by someone who had been drinking and they were pulled over. Even though the teenage driver had a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of .08, the officer just drove them to the driver's home and turned them over to the parents with a lecture instead of a DWI citation. Several teens with the

#### QUOTES FROM FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS WHO REPORTED TO HAVE RIDDEN WITH A DRUNK DRIVER

- ◆ "The person did not seem drunk."
- ◆ "He knows his limits and would not drive if he felt he was too drunk."
- ◆ "I didn't have a license so there was no choice."

worst driving records reported that their biggest fear was getting a ticket because it put their license in jeopardy.

- **Safety Belts:** In all four cities, focus group participants were aware of the *Click It or Ticket* campaign. As a result, fear of enforcement was the only reason some could offer for wearing a safety belt. Many participants reported that they only would put their safety belts on when they saw a police officer.
- **Speeding and Aggressive Driving:** Focus group participants reported they did not consider driving five or ten miles above the speed limit to be dangerous. Instead, they perceive it as just keeping up with traffic, as they were advised to do in Driver's Education. Participants also reported ignoring anti-speeding campaigns and enforcement efforts.
- **Distracted Driving:** When asked about distracted driving, participants did not see the relationship between the numerous things that distract them in their cars and their high rate of minor fender-bender type crashes. A high percentage of crashes reported by the teens involved rear-ending a car that had stopped while the teen driver was looking away from the road. Cell phones are also not perceived as a serious risk by most teens, yet they complain about other drivers who do stupid things while talking on their cell phones. Another factor that focus groups discussed related to distracted driving was music. Participants commented that music plays a huge part in a teenager's life, especially when they are driving, and the prospect of a trip with no music is almost intolerable.
- **Drowsy Driving:** The majority of focus group respondents reported experiencing severe sleepiness often due to tough school schedules and social interests. Additionally, the participants said they still use cars to get from place to place no matter how little sleep they have had.

- **Message Content and Style:** Focus groups suggested that the current generation of new drivers needs to hear factual messages about drunk driving and safety belt use. Comments from focus group participants also suggested that messages aimed at teens should avoid preaching or telling teens what to do, and concentrate on providing the teens with facts on which to base their decisions.
- **Delivery Mechanisms:** Focus group participants also commented that they equate importance with production values and saturation. If a message is important they expect it to show up everywhere, on TV, on the radio, in billboards, in the movies, in posters, and in news stories.

## Conclusion

While this study provided extensive insight into unsafe driving behaviors in teens, recommendations for messages and delivery systems, development efforts should not be based solely on focus group studies. More quantitative research should be conducted to determine the relationship between the unsafe behaviors identified in this study and traffic crashes for teens between the ages of 15 and 18.

## How to Order

To order **Teen Unsafe Driving Behaviors: Focus Group Final Report** (44 pages), developed by PerformTech, write to the Office of Communications, NHTSA, NPO-500, 400 Seventh Street SW., Washington, DC 20590, fax 202-366-7096 or download from [www.nhtsa.dot.gov](http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov). Lori Gabrielle Millen was the Contracting Officer's Technical Representative for this project.



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