# Fatal crashes involving teen drivers drop (Update)

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Graphic shows state-by-state breakdown of fatal crashes involving drivers aged 16 or 17 years per 100,000 population

(AP) -- Far fewer people are dying in car crashes with teens at the wheel, but it's not because teenagers are driving more cautiously. Experts say laws are tougher, and cars and highways are safer.

Fatal car crashes involving teen drivers fell by about a third over five years, according to a new federal report that credits tougher restrictions on younger drivers.

The number of deaths tied to these accidents dropped from about 2,200 in 2004 to 1,400 in 2008, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

The CDC looked at fatal accidents involving drivers who were 16 or 17. There were more than 9,600 such incidents during the five-year span, and more than 11,000 people died, including more than 4,000 of the teen drivers and more than 3,400 of their passengers.

The report is being published in Friday's issue of the CDC's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report.

The rate of such fatal crashes has been declining since 1996. Experts credit a range of factors, including safer cars with air bags and highway improvements, which reduce the risk of death.

The number of non-fatal accidents involving drivers 16 and 17 years old has been dropping as well - by 31 percent from 2004 through 2008, according to government figures.

The decline is similar to the 36 percent drop in fatal crashes reported in the new CDC report.

Experts say a chief reason is that most states have been getting tougher on when teens can drive and when they can carry passengers.

"It's not that teens are becoming safer," said Russ Rader, spokesman for the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, an Arlington, Va.-based research group funded by auto insurance companies.

"It's that state laws enacted in the last 15 years are taking teens out of the most hazardous driving situations," such as driving at night or with other teens in the car, he said.

Graduated driver's licensing programs, as they are called, began appearing in 1996, and 49 states now have them. Some are stricter than others, which may be one reason death rates vary by state, Rader said.

The CDC found that Wyoming had the highest death rate, with about 60 traffic fatalities involving 16- and 17-year-old drivers per 100,000 people that age. New York and New Jersey, which have rigorous driving restrictions on teens, had the lowest rates, about 10 per 100,000.

Wyoming's driver's license laws are laxer than some other states. For example, 16-year-olds are allowed to drive until 11 p.m., or in some cases even later, while other states force them off the roads starting at 9 p.m.

The author of the report, CDC epidemiologist Ruth Shults, said rural states such as Wyoming tend to have higher rates of traffic deaths. One problem is that remote stretches of road are hard to reach quickly by ambulance, and even harder to get a critically injured person to a trauma center, experts say.

Lorrie Pozarik, a consultant to Wyoming state government on traffic safety issues, said the state ranks poorly in seat-belt use. A love of pickup trucks has a lot to do with that.

"People feel like, 'I'm in a pickup, I don't need a belt,'" Pozarik said. "Our No. 1 fatal crash is a single-vehicle rollover. It happens to be the one crash where a seat belt is most effective when it comes to saving your life.

"The bottom line is that we have no perception of risk in Wyoming," Pozarik continued. "You're driving along the highway, there isn't a car in sight. You can see 10 miles in 20 directions, and you're sort of sitting back and cruising."

In New York, the driver's license restrictions can at times be annoying, said Ali Janicki, a 17-year-old high school senior in the town of North White Plains.

Janicki had a "junior" license when she was 16, which restricted her from driving after 9 p.m. and from driving with more than one other youth in the car. She broke the rules a few times, giving her sister and a friend a ride home from school, or driving home from a movie after 9.

Sometimes, she also needed a parent to drive her to nighttime parties. "It kind of bugged me," she said. "But I understand why."

She said she was nearly in an accident Thursday, but blamed another - older - driver's error. "I think older people, past about 40, should have to take a test and make sure their eyes are still working the same way," she said.

**More information:** CDC report: http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr

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