

Teens making poor choices when it comes to riding in vehicles

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Injury prevention experts have long known that teens are less likely than other motorists to wear seat belts while driving. Now, researchers from the Meharry-State Farm Alliance at Meharry Medical College have discovered lack of seat belt use by teen passengers may be an even bigger problem.

In the first ever direct comparison of the differences between driver and passenger seat belt use for a nationally representative teen population, the Meharry researchers found that 59% of teens always buckled up in the driver seat but only 42% always wore seat belts as passengers. Even more sobering, only 38% of all teens reported always buckling up as both drivers and passengers.

The study population comprised over 12,000 African American, white, and Hispanic public and private high school students ages 16 or older who participated in the 2001 and 2003 National Youth Risk Behavior Surveys. The surveys are conducted every two years by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to track the leading causes of death and disability among U.S. teens.

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for U.S. teens, accounting for nearly 5,000 fatalities each year. About 40% of all teen motor vehicle occupant deaths involve passengers.

"Because seat belts can reduce the risk of injury and death in crashes by more than 50%, there is a critical need for interventions to increase seat

belt use by teens as both drivers and passengers," said Nathaniel Briggs, MD, MSc, lead researcher on the study, published in the September 2008 issue of the American Journal of Preventive Medicine.

To address the issue, Briggs and his colleagues recommend a combination of approaches.

- Upgrade state seat belt laws to uniformly require that teen motor vehicle occupants in the rear seat be secured in seat belts. Currently, the majority of state laws are limited to front seat coverage for some or all teens in the 16-19 age group.

- Upgrade state seat belt laws from "secondary" (law enforcement officers can ticket motorists for seat belt law violations only after stopping them for another offense) to "primary" (law enforcement officers can stop and ticket motorists solely for seat belt law violations).

- Enhance enforcement efforts directed toward teen motorists.

- Develop comprehensive, community-based interventions including education, peer-to-peer persuasion, and parental monitoring.

"This research reinforces why State Farm is actively involved in advocating for laws that help prevent injuries and deaths resulting from motor vehicle crashes. It's clear from these findings that primary seat belt laws for all occupants would help us accomplish that goal," said Laurette Stiles, Vice-President - Strategic Resources at State Farm.

Additionally, the researchers pointed out a need for targeted interventions that address those teen subpopulations least likely to wear seat belts regardless of whether they are drivers or passengers, including young men, African Americans, students experiencing academic difficulties, and those with a history of either drinking and driving or

riding with a drinking driver.

Source: Meharry Medical College

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