

Survey finds nearly one-third talk on cell phone behind wheel

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AUSTIN – Night-time driving and cell phone use are much more likely than alcohol to cause accidents for teenage drivers, according to a new study released Tuesday by the Texas Transportation Institute.

The study, which included a survey of 4,400 teenage drivers at 18 high schools across the state, also found that fewer than one percent felt that driving at night could be unsafe and that only a third recognized that it's dangerous to talk or text on a cell phone while driving.

About two-thirds of teenagers surveyed said they talk on cell phones while behind the wheel and more than 50 percent said they read or send text messages while driving.

"The toll taken on younger drivers has to be especially disturbing," said Dennis Christiansen, director of the institute, referring to the nearly 500 teen drivers killed in accidents every year in Texas. "The teen driver safety problem has reached epidemic proportions and has become an urgent public health crisis."

The institute, housed in the Texas A&M University System, is a transportation research agency that works closely with the Texas Department of Transportation.

The study was released to help publicize the agency's Teens in the Drivers Seat program and to alert teenagers and their parents about the increased hazards for youthful drivers after daylight saving time ends this weekend. Nearly two-thirds of teen crashes happen between 6 p.m. and 6 a.m., according to public safety officials.

"At first blush, I would have expected kids in urban environments to be taking part in that activity more," said Russell Henk, program director of the agency's Teens in the Driver Seat program, which released the survey results Tuesday. "But the more we've thought about it, I think for the typical urban teen driving in San Antonio or on the 610 Loop in Houston, a lot of those things they can't do. It's too congested, too dangerous and they can't take part."

Of 4,442 students surveyed at 17 Texas high schools, 48 percent of those from rural schools reported talking on the cell phone at least 10 times while driving. Among urban students, 25 percent said they were active phone users.

More than 33 percent of rural students said they had text messaged at least 10 times while driving, compared with 18 percent of urban students.

Henk said the perception among young rural drivers is that the risk is much lower because there's obviously less traffic. Fatalities, however, actually are higher in rural areas, he said.

"We know 65 percent of teens we lose in a rural environment, 35 percent in urban, because speeds are higher," he said. "That's directly linked to traffic congestion. When you're crawling along, there's only so fast you can go."

The study also showed almost one-fourth of the teens surveyed have driven at least once after taking an alcoholic drink and almost 15 percent reported that they drove at least once after taking illegal drugs. Nearly 6 percent of the kids surveyed said they'd driven 10 times or more after at least one drink. And more than 4 percent said they drove at least 10 times after taking illegal drugs.

"For this whole age group, it's illegal, but it's happening," Henk said. "That's part of the reality.

"And if they're going to admit to doing it even a little bit, by inference we know they're probably doing it a lot more than that. It should be scary for all of us."

In the study conducted over the past year, 1,319 students who responded were from rural districts; 3,123 from urban districts.

About 6,000 teens die in car wrecks each year, some 500 in Texas, the institute said. Research shows the fatalities are attributed to inexperience plus five overriding risks: nighttime driving, distractions like cell phones, speeding, ignoring seat belts and alcohol,

Fewer than 1 percent of all the students said they understood driving at night is unsafe. At the same time, almost half said they routinely drive after 10 p.m.

"Nighttime driving is at the top of the danger list, but it's at the bottom of the awareness list," said Krizia Martinez, an institute spokeswoman. "We're working to change that, because if we can help other young drivers really understand the dangers they face, we can help them drive more safely."

Among all the Texas students surveyed:

- 19 percent said they had exceeded the speed limit by 10 mph 10 times or more. Almost 44 percent said they never topped the speed limit by 10 mph.
- 51 percent said at least once they drove with passengers who didn't wear a seat belt. Eleven percent said that happened 10 or more times.
- 64 percent said they always wore a seat belt while driving. Less than 10 percent said they'd driven 10 more more times without buckling up.
- 42 percent took a formal driver education class.
- 40 percent took driver ed from their parents.
- 17 percent took an on-the-road test with a law enforcement officer before getting their license.
- 63 percent are allowed by their parents to drive alone at least once a week.
- 28 percent participated in a street race at least once; almost 8 percent said they'd done it 10 or more times.

The survey also showed more than 23 percent of the students drove more than 20 miles a day, with more than 31 percent of them from rural areas and 19 percent from the city.

Students from the following high schools participated in the survey: Abilene, Carrollton Creekview, Cedar Park Vista Ridge, Cuero, El Paso Americas, Garland, Garland Lakeview Centennial, Garland Naaman Forest, Garland North Garland, Garland South Garland, Mason, Odessa, Rowlett, Sachse, Tyler Lee, West, Whitehouse.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.