



Who is behind the wheel when young passengers die in a car crash?

More than one-third of all fatalities among car passengers occurs in the 10 to 24-year age group. The majority of these young passengers die in a car driven by an 18 to 24-year old. These young drivers are known to run higher risks due to their mental immaturity and lack of experience. Inevitably, their passengers are exposed to this same high risk. Moreover, there may even be an *additional* risk when youths drive in a car together: the influence of 'peer pressure' and 'distraction' on the young driver by the passengers. This has been studied in the new SWOV fact sheet *Young drivers and their young passengers*.

Crash studies into an additional risk by (young) passengers have until now only been carried out abroad. In general, these studies indicate a higher crash rate for young drivers when they are accompanied by young passengers in the car. On the other hand, when young drivers take passengers that are older, the crash rate diminishes accordingly.

Youths and young adults of the 10 to 24-year age group gradually break away from their parents or carers while friends are getting increasingly more important during this period. Youths of this age group are also impulsive, like to experiment and do not shy away from taking risks. Especially not when they are part of a group. Peer pressure often plays a role. A young person will then do his or her utmost to

meet the group's expectations. This peer pressure may have a negative result for young drivers: they feel challenged by the passengers and feel that they have to prove themselves. Thus, an American study showed that young drivers more often run a red light when they are in the company of a peer passenger than when they are on their own. Yet, this is not the only reason why driving with peer passengers may be more hazardous. Passengers are also a source of distraction. Distraction interrupts the routines of the driving task of young drivers more easily than is the case with more experienced drivers. Other American research showed, among other things, that inexperienced male drivers more often failed to perceive hazards in the presence of passengers. Especially when the passenger turned out to be an 'attractive' woman. The

influence of peer pressure and distraction diminishes when young drivers are growing older.

Negative mirror behaviour

In addition to peer pressure and distraction, a third hazard occurs. Young passengers, in their turn, can be negatively influenced by the hazardous driving behaviour of the driver. If they are exposed to the hazardous driving behaviour of their peers, chances are that they are going to perceive this behaviour as 'normal' and will also show it later when they have become drivers themselves.

Passenger prohibition

In order to reduce the number of casualties among youths, the US, Australia and New Zealand have introduced a prohibition for young people to drive with passengers in the car as part of a graduated driving licence. In the states in the US where this measure has been implemented, this has resulted in circa 9% fewer casualties among 16 to 17-year olds.

Assist rather than hinder

In various countries campaigns have also been launched to stimulate passengers to correct

drivers when they act hazardously and to help instead of hinder him. One example is the Norwegian 'Speak out' campaign in which the use of mass media is combined with police enforcement. During the campaign period the number of fatalities and seriously injured among passengers decreased by 30%. However, the campaign appeared not to have an effect on the number of casualties among drivers. There are presently two programmes in the Netherlands that focus on young passengers: the ShotGun initiative by the Dutch Traffic Safety

Organization and RoadSense by Mercedes Benz. They are both meant to make passengers aware of their influence and the hazards, although the effects on the behaviour have not yet been studied.

More knowledge needed

In the absence of Dutch research, practically all knowledge about the backgrounds of the influence of passengers and the effects of measures is derived from foreign studies. Yet, it is difficult to compare young drivers in, for

instance, the US, because they are generally a few years younger. It is recommended to carry out further research in the Netherlands and to answer the question to what extent young passenger fatalities occur with young drivers. Subsequently, it should be considered in which way this problem can be diminished.

SWOV fact sheet

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