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[Today's Editorials](#)
[Write a Letter](#)
[Headline Stories](#)
[Local](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Sports](#)
[Weather](#)
[Classifieds](#)
[Legals](#)
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[20 Under Forty](#)
[Business Card Section](#)
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[Reflections II](#)
[You drink-you drive-you lose](#)
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Article Last Updated: Friday, March 31, 2006 - 6:16:34 PM MST

Teen deaths and seat belts

Something has to be done.

Somehow we need to convince teenagers of the vital -- life-saving -- need to use their seat belts every time -- every time -- they get in a car.

The physician-led traffic safety advocacy group called End Needless Death on Our Roadways (END) has shown that young drivers and passengers (16-20 years old) are killed in motor vehicle crashes in higher numbers than any other age group traveling U.S. roads. Even more disturbing, failure to buckle up appears to be a root cause of this needless death.

Nationwide, these young drivers make up only six percent of the driving population, and they travel far less than individuals in older age groups, yet they are killed in higher numbers than any other age group.

"In 2004 alone, 5,135 young vehicle occupants were killed in motor vehicle crashes. Tragically, many of these fatalities and serious injuries could have been prevented if the vehicle's occupants were wearing a safety belt," according to Dr. Thomas Esposito, co-chairperson of END.

Safety belt use continues to increase and traffic fatalities are on the decline, particularly in those states that have passed primary safety belt laws. Primary safety belt laws that allow police to stop and ticket motorists who fail to buckle up have proven to change behavior and save lives.

Unfortunately, in some states that do not have a primary safety belt law, motor vehicle fatalities remain troubling, particularly for young motorists. Colorado is one of those states. However, a primary safety belt law has passed both the Colorado Senate and House and is now back in the House for approval of amendments.

Esposito pointed out that "motor vehicle fatalities among teen motorists in Colorado are at epidemic proportions. In 2004, 66 percent of all 16-20-year-olds killed in car crashes in Colorado were unrestrained, eight percent above the national average."

"Congress has established an incentive program that provides grant money to states that pass primary safety belt laws. In addition to saving lives, under Congress' plan, Colorado would realize \$12 million in federal grant money if they pass and implement a primary safety belt law," according to Dr. Andrea Barthwell, co-chairperson of END.

In states that do not have a primary safety belt law, it is even more crucial that parents step in and take the lead in ensuring their young child's early driving experience is safe. To assist in this effort, END and others have



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developed You, Safely Home, a comprehensive, teen-driver contract created to help keep young drivers safe throughout their early driving experience and beyond.

You, Safely Home addresses the important issues a parent should discuss with a young driver including safety belt use, impaired driving, passenger restrictions, curfew and vehicle equipment. You, Safely Home can be found online at www.EndNeedlessDeath.org. "It is critical that we all work together to end the needless death associated with motor vehicle crashes by providing incentives and tools that encourage safe driving behaviors by teen motorists," Barthwell said.

It is important that Colorado lawmakers pass a primary safety belt law and that Gov. Owens signs it into law. It may change our behavior behind the wheel -- but only toward the side of greater safety.

[RETURN TO TOP](#)



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