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## Kentucky teen drivers face deadly statistics

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Cathy Jones paid for private driving lessons for her son, Alex, before he got his license last year. She spent hours practicing with him, and has strict rules about how many friends he can have in the car.

But the 17-year-old has had two accidents already, and while he wasn't hurt and neither were his fault, his mother worries.

Teens "think nothing's going to happen to them," she said.

Too often, it does. Kentucky ranks as the ninth deadliest state for youth-related driving fatalities, according to a study released this week. Indiana ranks 27th.

For every 100,000 Kentucky drivers aged 16-20 in 2003, there were 90 fatal crashes involving such a driver, compared to a national average of 68, according to the study by the National Safety Council and the physician-led End Needless Death on Our Roadways.

The study found that teens represent 6.3 percent of Kentucky drivers but were involved in 17 percent of all fatal crashes in 2003.

"Kentucky teenagers are at particular risk," said John Ulczycki, transportation director of the National Safety Council.

He contends that's partly because Kentucky's graduated teen licensing isn't as strict as most states'; driver's education is no longer offered in most schools; and there's no seat-belt law allowing police to stop motorists solely for failing to wear a seat belt.

Ulczycki said the study also was meant in part to remind parents that whatever a state's laws, teen driving rules restricting passengers and night driving can be created at home. Ultimately, he said, "it's parents' responsibility."

### 'It's nerve-wracking'

Nationally, motor vehicle crashes are the No. 1 cause of death for teens aged 15 to 19. And one out of every five inexperienced 16-year-olds will be in a car crash.

Driving at night, with other passengers or while using a cell phone greatly increases young drivers' risks, according to the council.

"It's nerve-wracking," said Jones, referring to the worries of a new driver's parent. "You let him go out, and every time the phone rings, you just cringe."

One way states have worked to lessen the risk is graduated licensing laws -- which extend the learning period through restrictions on things such as night driving or passengers.

They've been adopted with varying levels of strictness in 46 states between 1993 and 2003. And during that time, auto deaths involving 16-year-olds declined by 26 percent, according the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

But among 16-year-olds who have full driving privileges, the rate of fatal crashes hasn't fallen, and it remains higher than that of any other age group.

In 1996, Kentucky extended the new driver learner's permit from 30 days to six months, barring teens from driving between midnight and 6 a.m. with some exceptions and requiring someone at least 21 years old to be present at all times. A four-hour driving course also is required. That's helped reduce deaths, but more could be done, said Mike Park, director of Kentucky's graduated licensing program.

Indiana requires a three-month period during which newly licensed drivers must drive only with an adult at least 21. In addition, licenses are considered probationary until drivers are 18, officials said.

Kentucky is one of only eight states that lack minimum supervised driving hours, nighttime restrictions extending past the learner's permit and passenger restrictions, according to the safety council.

State Rep. Tom Burch, D-Buechel, failed to persuade the 2005 General Assembly to create an "intermediate license" that would be required for six months after the initial learner's permit expires.

It would bar 16-year-olds from driving between midnight and 6 a.m. and limit unrelated teen passengers to one or two. Also, it would require 60 hours of supervised driving time with no violations before a full license was granted, Burch said.

"There's all kinds of things we should be doing. ... Kentucky's dragging its feet," said Burch, who said he plans to introduce his bill again later this month.

The measure was approved in the House but stalled in the Senate; opponents argued that there wasn't enough money to administer the changes, although no cost estimate has been calculated.

The session ended before differences could be ironed out, said Burch, for whom the fight is personal.

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