



HAWAII'S NEWS CHANNEL

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Posted: June 28,2006 05:55 PM

Hawaii, ranked 10th in the nation for teen driver fatalities

Kirk Matthews

Startling numbers from the National Safety Council today - Hawaii is ranked tenth in the country when it comes to teen drivers involved in traffic fatalities. But that statistic could be misleading.

The images are all too familiar - mangled cars and roadside memorials where teen-agers have died at the wheel. The national safety council says just over 23 percent of the car crash fatalities here involve teens. But that percentage doesn't take into account the population demographics.

"When we look at just the per capita rate among that 16 to 20 year age group, hawaii is more like in the middle of the country in terms of risk," says Dan Galanis, Department of Health.

Perhaps more startling is the difference within the teen groups themselves. Sixteen year old drivers are at much greater risk than 19 year old drivers.

"Because it really jumps out at you when one group has five times the risk of being in a crash compared to an older group, it's clear that you need to target prevention strategies in that younger group," says Galanis.

Part of that prevention strategy is a new law that took effect last January, putting restrictions on when a teen can drive a car and who can be in that car - the law limits the number of teen passengers.

"The more teens you get in a single car the more likely a crash is going to result probably because of distraction issues and inattention," says Galanis.

Inattention is one of the primary contributors to crashes among teens - also, speeding and, to a lesser degree, drugs and alcohol. Even if there is a crash, a fatality is not inevitable.

"If you can't prevent the crash, certainly you can limit some of the consequences and number one in that regard is use of restraints, use of seat belts both for the front seat passengers and the back seat passengers," says Galanis.

Half of the people killed in car crashes in Hawaii were not wearing seat belts. Putting statistics into perspective, Hawaii was 46th in the nation in terms of car crash fatalities. Still, a large percentage of those were teens - but Galanis says there's hope.

"And with the enactment of graduated licensing, we're pretty confident that will happen over time," says Galanis.

The State Transportation Department Director, Rodney Hiraga, says 2005 numbers show an improvement... dropping from the twenty-three percent reported by the national safety council for 2004 to fourteen percent for 2005.

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