

Nation/Politics

20% of fatal crashes involve young drivers

By Joyce Howard Price
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Drivers ages 16 to 20 are involved in 20 percent of all fatal motor vehicle crashes in the United States, but make up just six percent of the driving population, according to a report released yesterday, ahead of the July Fourth holiday weekend.

The District is ranked as the deadliest jurisdiction for youth-related traffic accidents, with nearly a third of its fatalities involving at least one driver younger than 21, the report says. The report was issued jointly by the National Safety Council and the physician-led traffic safety advocacy group Coalition to End Needless Death on our Roadways (END).

The study found that although teen-related traffic fatalities fell 5.2 percent nationally from 1994 to 2004, the District's share shot up by more than 60 percent.

Maryland and Virginia also were among the 20 jurisdictions that showed a rise in the 10-year period, with increases of 12.7 percent and 9.0 percent, respectively. At 16.8 percent, Maryland is below the national average in terms of youth-related fatal crashes, and at 21 percent, Virginia is slightly ahead of the national average.

"There is absolutely no question that youth-related driving fatalities are an epidemic in the United States, and it has been a problem for far too long," said Dr. Thomas Esposito, co-chairman of END and vice-chairman of the American College of Surgeons' Chicago Committee on Trauma.

John Ulczycki, director of the National Safety Council's Transportation Safety Group, said the report shows "that the number of people dying in crashes involving young drivers has not been significantly reduced," despite many efforts to curb the fatalities.

Mr. Ulczycki pointed out that "many states have enacted Graduated Driver Licensing laws, and numerous education programs have been implemented by the public and private sectors to address the issue. However, the death toll is not changing much."

Introduced in 1999, the graduated driver's license features a provisional license stage for younger drivers, beginning with an instructional permit and ending with full driving privileges.

The program was designed to ease novice drivers into the driving environment and provides for additional legal guardian involvement while stressing the importance of a good driving record.

The two groups also said they will call on states and traffic safety advocates to cooperate in a comprehensive survey designed to address youth-related driving fatalities. The survey will analyze youth driving programs nationwide.

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