

Traffic Safety Facts 1997

U.S. Department of Transportation
National Highway Traffic
Safety Administration



Young Drivers



There were 179.5 million licensed drivers in the United States in 1996 (1997 data not available). Young drivers, between 15 and 20 years old, accounted for 6.7 percent (12.1 million) of the total, a 7.6 percent decrease from the 13.1 million young drivers in 1986.

In 1997, 7,885 15- to 20-year-old drivers were involved in fatal crashes — a 23 percent decrease from the 10,193 involved in 1987. Driver fatalities for this age group decreased by 27 percent between 1987 and 1997. For young males, driver fatalities dropped by 32 percent, compared with a 12 percent decrease for young females (Table 3).

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for 15 to 20 year olds (based on 1994 figures, which are the latest mortality data currently available from the National Center for Health Statistics). In 1997, 3,336 drivers 15 to 20 years old were killed, and an additional 365,000 were injured, in motor vehicle crashes.

In 1997, 14 percent (7,885) of all the drivers involved in fatal crashes (56,602) were young drivers 15 to 20 years old, and 17 percent (2,001,000) of all the drivers involved in police-reported crashes (12,066,000) were young drivers.

“Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for people from 15 to 20 years old.”

Figure 1. Driver Fatalities and Drivers Involved in Fatal Crashes Among Drivers 15 to 20 Years Old, 1987-1997

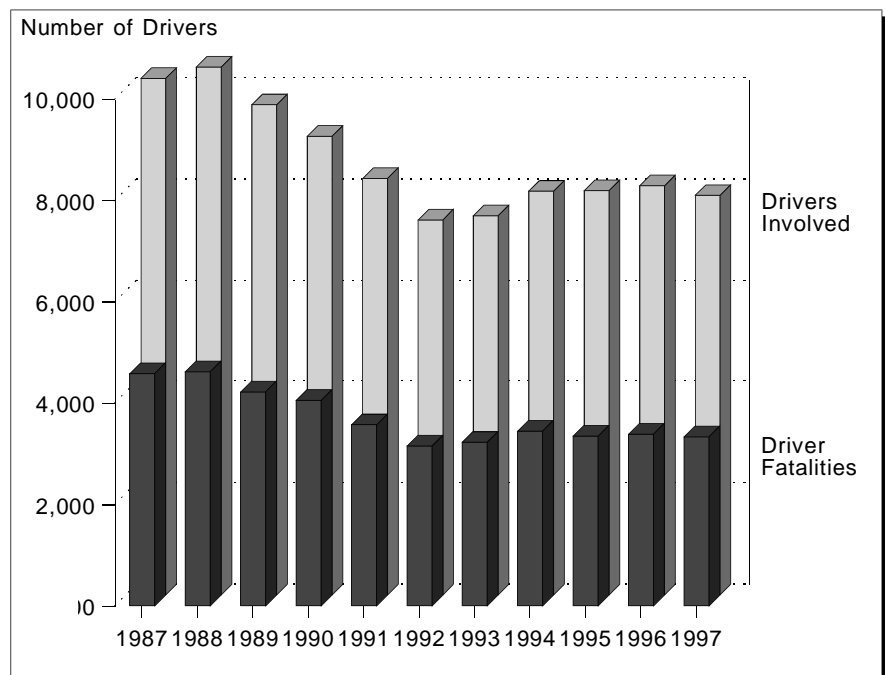


Table 1. Drivers Involved in 1997 Fatal Crashes by Age Group and 1996 Driver Involvement Rates

	Age Group (Years)							
	15-20	21-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-69	70+
1997 Population (Percent)	8.5	5.1	14.8	16.4	12.6	8.2	3.6	9.1
Drivers Involved in 1997 Fatal Crashes (Percent)								
Single-Vehicle	18.3	12.4	23.4	18.6	11.9	6.3	2.5	6.2
Multi-Vehicle	12.0	9.0	21.8	20.1	14.3	8.8	3.5	10.4
All Fatal Crashes	14.2	10.2	22.4	19.6	13.5	7.9	3.1	8.9
1996 Licensed Drivers* (Percent)	6.7	6.9	21.3	22.6	17.3	10.9	4.7	9.5
Drivers Involved in 1996 Fatal Crashes per 100,000 Licensed Drivers	65.1	45.7	35.1	26.7	24.0	22.2	20.3	28.8

* 1997 data not available.

“In 1997, 14 percent of all the drivers involved in fatal crashes were between 15 and 20 years old.”

Almost one-third (312) of the 15- to 20-year-old drivers involved in fatal crashes who had an invalid operator’s license at the time of the crash also had a previous license suspension or revocation. For the same age group, almost 30 percent of the drivers who were killed in motor vehicle crashes during 1997 had been drinking (Table 4).

Table 2. Drivers 15 to 20 Years Old Involved in Fatal Crashes by Previous Driving Record and License Status, 1997

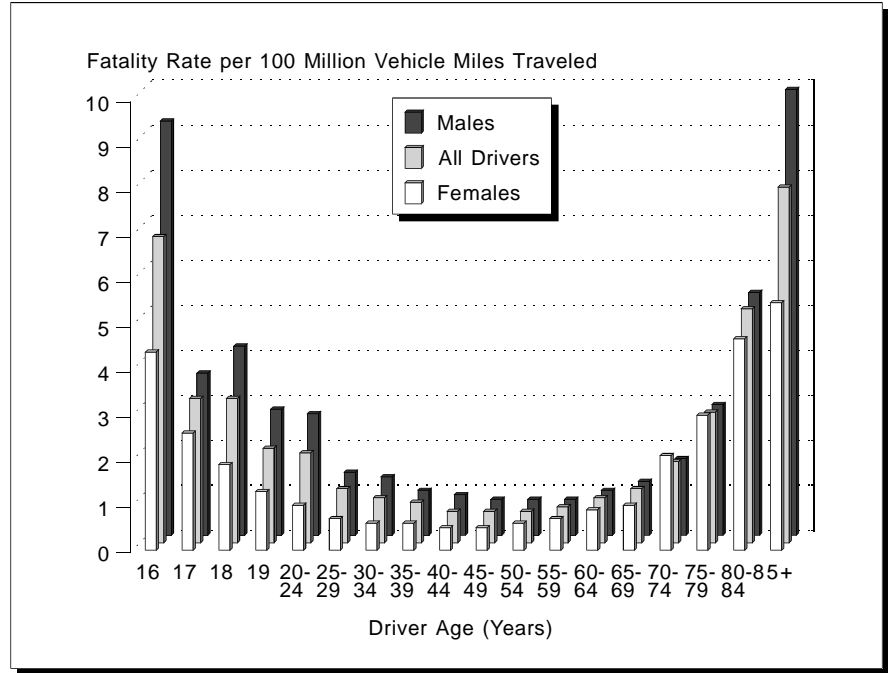
Driving Record	License Status					
	Valid (6,778)		Invalid (1,056)		Total (7,885)*	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
Previous Recorded Crashes	1,295	19.4	133	14.4	1,428	15.8
Previous Recorded Suspensions or Revocations	438	6.5	312	32.7	750	9.7
Previous DWI Convictions	66	1.0	67	7.0	133	1.7
Previous Speeding Convictions	1,613	23.8	170	17.8	1,783	23.1
Previous Other Harmful or Moving Convictions	1,223	18.1	201	21.1	1,424	18.4

* Includes 51 drivers with unknown license status.

In 1997, the estimated economic cost of police-reported crashes involving drivers between 15 and 20 years old was \$31.9 billion.

When driver fatality rates are calculated on the basis of estimated annual travel, the highest rates are found among the youngest and oldest drivers. Compared with the fatality rate for drivers 25 through 69 years old, the rate for teenage drivers (16 to 19 years old) is about 4 times as high, and the rate for drivers in the oldest group is 9 times as high.

Figure 2. Driver Fatality Rates by Age and Sex, 1994



“The fatality rate for teenage drivers, based on estimated annual travel, is about 4 times as high as the rate for drivers 25 through 69 years old.”

Female drivers under age 50 have a lower fatality rate than their male counterparts, on a per mile driven basis, while the rate is essentially the same for both male and female drivers over 50 years of age, with the exception of the oldest group (Figure 2).

Table 3. Involvement of Drivers 15 to 20 Years Old in Fatal Crashes, 1987 and 1997

	1987			1997			Percentage Change, 1987-1997		
	Total	Age 15-20	Percentage of Total	Total	Age 15-20	Percentage of Total	Number		Percentage Age 15-20
							Total	Age 15-20	
<i>Drivers Involved in Fatal Crashes</i>									
Total	61,442	10,193	16.6	56,602	7,885	13.9	-8%	-23%	-16%
Male	46,884	7,773	16.6	40,658	5,582	13.7	-13%	-28%	-17%
Female	13,614	2,420	17.8	14,846	2,303	15.5	+9%	-5%	-13%
<i>Driver Fatalities</i>									
Total	26,833	4,582	17.1	24,644	3,336	13.5	-8%	-27%	-21%
Male	20,688	3,499	16.9	17,767	2,380	13.4	-14%	-32%	-21%
Female	6,143	1,083	17.6	6,750	956	14.2	+10%	-12%	-20%

Motorcycles

During 1997, 181 young motorcycle drivers (15-20 years old) were killed and an additional 5,000 were injured.

Helmets are estimated to be 29 percent effective in preventing fatalities among motorcyclists. NHTSA estimates that helmets saved the lives of 486 motorcyclists of all ages in 1997, and that if all motorcyclists had worn helmets, an additional 266 lives could have been saved.

During 1997, 47 percent of the motorcycle drivers between 15 and 20 years old who were fatally injured in crashes were not wearing helmets.

Of the young motorcycle drivers involved in fatal crashes in 1997, more than one-quarter (28 percent) were either unlicensed or driving with an invalid license.

Alcohol

NHTSA defines a fatal traffic crash as being *alcohol-related* if either a driver or a nonoccupant (e.g., pedestrian) had a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.01 grams per deciliter (g/dl) or greater in a police-reported traffic crash. Persons with a BAC of 0.10 g/dl or greater involved in fatal crashes are considered to be *intoxicated*. This is the legal limit of intoxication in most states.

In 1997, 21 percent of the young drivers 15 to 20 years old who were killed in crashes were intoxicated.

Table 4. Alcohol Involvement Among Drivers 15 to 20 Years Old Involved in Fatal Crashes, 1997

Driver Status	Number of Drivers	Percentage With BAC Levels		
		0.00 g/dl	0.01-0.09 g/dl	≥0.10 g/dl
Surviving	4,549	84.4	6.9	8.7
Fatally Injured	3,336	71.5	7.4	21.1
Total	7,885	78.9	7.1	14.0

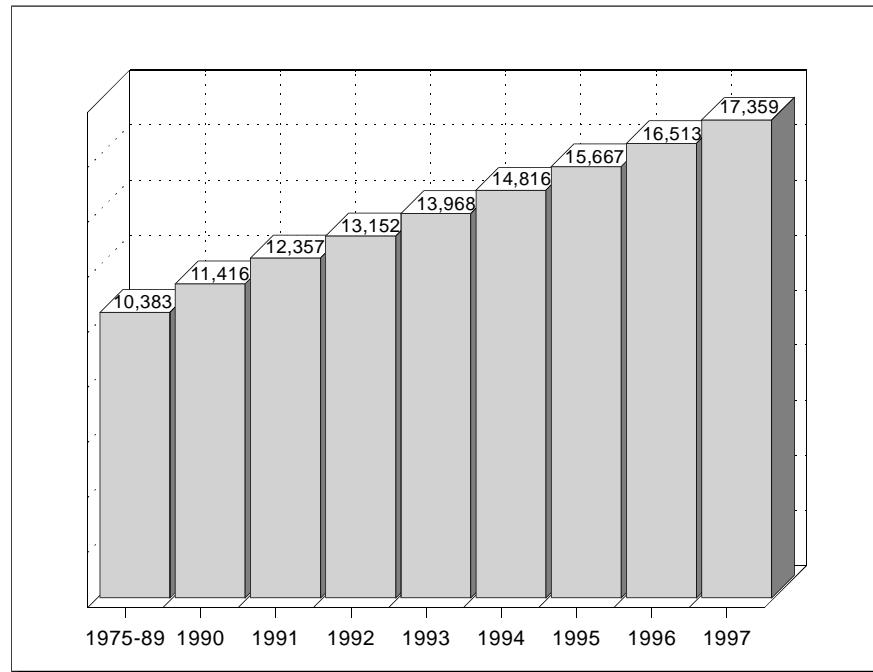
The severity of a crash increases with alcohol involvement. In 1997, 3 percent of the 15- to 20-year-old drivers involved in property-damage-only crashes had been drinking, 4 percent of those involved in crashes resulting in injury had been drinking, and 21 percent of those involved in fatal crashes had been drinking.

In both the categories of drivers killed and drivers involved in fatal crashes, the numbers of drivers 15 to 20 years old who were intoxicated dropped by 48 percent between 1987 and 1997.

“In 1997, 21 percent of the young drivers who were killed in crashes were intoxicated.”

All states and the District of Columbia now have 21-year-old minimum drinking age laws. NHTSA estimates that these laws have reduced traffic fatalities involving drivers 18 to 20 years old by 13 percent and have saved an estimated 17,359 lives since 1975. In 1997, an estimated 846 lives were saved by minimum drinking age laws. Fifteen states have set 0.08 g/dl as the legal intoxication limit, and 46 states plus the District of Columbia have zero tolerance laws for drivers under the age of 21 (it is illegal for drivers under 21 to drive with BAC levels of 0.02 g/dl or greater).

Figure 3. Cumulative Estimated Number of Lives Saved by Minimum Drinking Age Laws, 1975-1997



“NHTSA estimates that minimum drinking age laws have saved 17,359 lives since 1975.”

For young drivers 15 to 20 years old, alcohol involvement is higher among males than among females. In 1997, 25 percent of the young male drivers involved in fatal crashes had been drinking at the time of the crash, compared with 12 percent of the young female drivers involved in fatal crashes.

Drivers are less likely to use restraints when they have been drinking. In 1997, 71 percent of the young drivers of passenger vehicles involved in fatal crashes who had been drinking were unrestrained. Of the young drivers who had been drinking and were killed in crashes, 79 percent were unrestrained.

For more information:

Information on young drivers is available from the National Center for Statistics and Analysis, NRD-31, 400 Seventh Street, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20590. Telephone inquiries should be addressed to Ms. Louann Hall at 1-800-934-8517. FAX messages should be sent to (202) 366-7078. General information on highway traffic safety can be accessed by Internet users at <http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/nlsa>. To report a safety-related problem or to inquire about motor vehicle safety information, contact the Auto Safety Hotline at 1-800-424-9393.