

U.S. Teens Report 'Frightening' Levels of Texting While Driving

By Ashley Halsey III

A quarter of U.S. teens ages 16 to 17 who have cellphones say they text while driving, and almost half of Americans ages 12 to 17 say they've been in cars with someone who texted while behind the wheel, according to a report released Monday by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project.

"The percentages of drivers who report texting while driving is extremely disturbing, given the severe safety hazards this behavior causes," said Fairfax County, Va., police Capt. Susan Culin, commander of the traffic division. "However, the percentage of teen drivers that report texting while driving is even more frightening, due to their inexperience."

Drivers younger than 20 had the highest distracted-driving fatality rate among all age groups last year, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Drivers 20 to 29 ranked second.

The administration said that 5,870 people died and about 515,000 were injured last year in accidents attributed to distracted driving. Twice as many fatalities, 11,773, were attributed to drunken driving.

The actual number of distracted-driving deaths and injuries might be higher. Drivers who cause accidents are no more prone to admit they were texting than they are to say they were drunk.

"I believe the percentage of teen drivers texting is even higher than this study reports," Culin said. "It's imperative that we take greater steps in correcting the problem by passing tougher laws and setting better examples for our children."

Over all, 81 percent of U.S. residents said they have used their cellphone while driving, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Of the 82 percent of 16- to 17-year-olds who have cellphones, 52 percent said they use them while driving.

Teens told Pew researchers that they texted while driving to find friends, get directions and flirt. Some said they tried to restrict texting to when they were stopped at red lights.

"Many teens understand the risks of texting behind the wheel," said Amanda Lenhart, co-author of the Pew report, "but the desire to stay connected is so strong for teens and their parents that safety sometimes takes a back seat to staying in touch with friends and family."

At a conference that U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood convened to discuss distracted driving, he urged parents to set an example for their children by paying attention to the road.

But, the Pew report says, "the frequency of teens reporting parent cellphone use behind the wheel in our focus groups was striking, and suggested, in many cases, that texting while driving is a family affair."

LA TIMES-WASHINGTON POST – 11-16-09

©2009 The Washington Post

Ashley Halsey III is a Washington Post Staff Writer.