

Houston & Texas News

June 15, 2007, 12:44AM

Teenage road deaths a result of inexperience

Beginners 10 times more likely to die in a crash

By MELANIE MARKLEY
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Car crashes are the leading cause of death among teenagers, experts say, largely because of their inexperience at the wheel and their lack of maturity at assessing risky situations.

Investigators believe Bobby Davis, 15, was driving a stolen sport utility vehicle that slammed into a train near Baytown early Thursday, killing four teens in the back seat and seriously injuring himself and another passenger.

Davis didn't have any kind of driver's license, officials said.

According to a Houston Chronicle analysis last year, drivers 15 and under were involved in 71 fatal wrecks in Texas between 2002 and 2004, and Harris County had the most. Five of those fatal crashes happened between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m., the same time period as Thursday's accident.

Russell Henk, research engineer for the Texas Transportation Institute in College Station, said beginning drivers are up to 10 times more likely to be involved in fatal wrecks than mature adults when comparing miles driven.

An analysis by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found that the crash rate per mile among 16- to 19-year-olds was four times the rate for middle-aged adults.

Dr. Arlene Greenspan, senior scientist at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, said the crash risk for beginning drivers starts to drop dramatically within the first year and the first 1,000 miles of driving.

"That's why recent laws focus on the very new driver," she said. "It's a very risky time, and teens are still learning to control the car, still learning this complex task of driving under different situations."

In Texas, 15-year-olds can drive legally only with a special hardship license or a learner's permit that requires the teen to be accompanied by a licensed driver at least 21 years old.

At 16, they may qualify for a provisional license, which for six months restricts when they drive and with whom. With that license, teens cannot drive between midnight and 5 a.m., cannot have more than one passenger under 21 who is not a family member and cannot talk on a cell phone while driving.

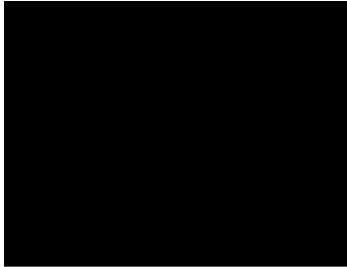
The Institute launched a peer-to-peer program in 2002 to help teens recognize the risks that can lead to an accident.

melanie.markley@chron.com

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The Texas Transportation Institute identifies teens' top risks for a car accident:

- Night-time driving.
- Distractions, including too many other teens in the car.
- Speeding.
- Failure to use seat belts.
- Use of alcohol or drugs.

For more information on the program, visit www.tdriver.com

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