

Commentary

A public health crisis: Teen drivers and service learning as a strategy to prevent injuries and death

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No matter how far, no matter whose car, always buckle up. It doesn't matter, if you are driving on a Saturday, in the month of May, in the State of Mississippi, and heading down Highway 49 to enjoy the fresh air and seafood of the gulf coast. It doesn't matter if you are heading east on highway 72, towards Corinth to visit the Shiloh National Military Park. It doesn't matter if you are heading north on Highway 61 to hear the sweet melodic sounds of blues music in Clarksdale. It doesn't matter if you are headed to your favorite "dear old college home" to watch a game. It doesn't matter, if you are just driving down the street to get a cup of coffee. No matter how far, no matter whose car, always buckle up. Unfortunately, many teen drivers in the United States and in the State of Mississippi, between 16 to 19 years of age don't heed these words of advice.

The issue of teen driving-related injuries and fatalities is a public health problem that affects everyone. According to the Centers of Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (2012a) motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for U.S. teens. In 2010, seven teens ages 16 to 19 died every day from motor vehicle injuries. If you or a loved one is driving on any Mississippi road you need to know that the State of Mississippi is ranked as one of the deadliest for teen drivers and the deadliest among all the Southern states. Driving on a Saturday is the most deadly day for teenage drivers in the South and May is the most deadly month for a teen to be on the road in Mississippi (Erie Insurance Company, 2012). With annual events like proms and graduation parties, and, of course, the start of summer vacation, teens are more likely to be on the road these times of the year; but parents beware, the period between Memorial Day and Labor Day has been labeled "The 100 Deadliest Days" for teen drivers (Mothers Against Drunk Driving, 2012). Higher traffic crashes during this time period can be attributed to teens having more free time under less parental supervision and having more opportunities to drive at night when road risks are higher and parent curfews may be relaxed.

Who is at risk? All parents are concerned about their teen's safety on the road, but there are a few risk factors that should make some parents more concerned than others. Male teen drivers are more likely to be involved, seriously injured or fatally killed in a motor vehicle crash than their female counterparts. Teens driving on rural roads are also at risk, since these roads are altogether different from their well-lit, closely monitored busier urban interstate counterparts. Novice teen drivers are at risk to injury and fatalities because they have limited behind-the-wheel "real world" road driving experience. This high crash risk extends throughout their first year of unsupervised driving. Teens should be kept from driving late at night and during the early morning hours when deadly crashes are most likely to occur.

What factors contributive to teen crashes and injuries? Teen drivers are more likely to underestimate dangerous situations, road conditions and are less likely to recognize hazardous situations when driving. Teen drivers tend to speed or drive far too fast for road conditions. A 2005 study by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) found that teens drive an average of 1.3 mph faster than all drivers as a whole (NIH, 2005). Distracted driving is a deadly epidemic that has devastating consequences on our nation's roadways (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, 2010). All distractions endanger driver, passenger, and bystander safety. Driving

distractions include cell phone use, texting, eating and the presence of teen passengers; however, the U.S. Department of Transportation indicated that text messaging was the most alarming distraction. A 2012 AT&T teen driver survey reported that texting among teens is often underreported (AT&T, 2012). The low use of seat belts is also a major contributor in the numbers of teens killed or sustaining severe injuries either as a driver or passenger in a motor vehicle crash. The Centers of Disease Control and Prevention data indicated that the prevalence of rarely or never wearing a seat belt was higher among African American students (10.3%) and Hispanic students (9.3%), than their Caucasian counterparts (6.3%) (CDC, 2012b). Research indicates that disparities in death, disability, and injury continue to exist for African American teens, especially males, in comparison with Caucasian youth. Motor vehicle deaths disproportionately impact youth from poor and minority communities (Juarez, Schlundt, Goldzweig, & Stinson, Jr., 2006). The over representation of minority teens in motor vehicle crashes has important implications for the preservation of African American community members' health and safety. A teen's sociopolitical environment is also a risk factor. It plays a role in the development of a teen's frame of reference about driving behaviors, including knowledge, attitudes, awareness, and expectations⁸. Many teens witness their parents and/or relatives not buckling up, drinking while driving, or using a motor vehicle in a hazardous manner. Teens may also hear messages or accept cultural standards regarding drinking while driving, presence of law enforcement, and police ticketing practices that create a tragic cycle, and parents who fail to model the safe operation of a motor vehicle, resulting in generation after generation copying a behavior, that ultimately increases the community's vulnerability to serious injury and untimely deaths. (Daniels et al., 2002).

Service Learning as a Strategy to Save Lives - Mississippi has seen a decline in fatalities of 15- to 19-year-olds over the last several years, from 103 in 2009 to 52 in 2012. Despite recent notable reductions in overall motor vehicle crash fatalities in Mississippi and in the United States, traffic collisions remain a formidable public health threat to U.S. adolescents (National Center for Statistics and Analysis, 2008, 2010). The Governors Highway Safety Association (2013) revealed that on a national level, deaths for teen drivers between the ages of 16-17 were up by as much as 19% between 2011 and 2012. Last year was the second year in a row that revealed an increase in teen driver deaths after improvements had been made with eight previous years of declines in those figures. These rising statistics suggest that there is a need for more public awareness, peer-to-peer education among teens and more collaboration across all educational levels to prevent injury and deaths among teen drivers.

In a collaborative research study funded by the CDC between the years of 2006-2010, Jackson State University, Meharry Medical College, the Meharry-State Farm Alliance, and a JSU community coalition of concerned individuals, implemented a multilevel intervention strategy that included service learning to reduce motor vehicle crashes among teens in the State of Mississippi. The service learning approach is rooted in experiential learning theory and involves methods under which students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that: (1) is conducted in and meets the needs of a community; (2) is usually coordinated with a secondary school or institution of higher education; (3) helps foster civic responsibility; (4) is integrated into and enhances the (core) academic curriculum in which the participants are enrolled; and (5) provides structured time for the students or participants to reflect on the service experience (Billig & Waterman, 2003). This intervention included traffic safety education in the form of a high school peer-to-peer service learning curriculum, community coalition support, public health and social media campaigns, and traffic law enforcement (Juarez, 2009).

Through service learning, students learned by developing and organizing efforts to solve real-world problems. Service learning offered students the opportunities to discuss some of the barriers associated with culturally inappropriate messages and/or messengers found in traditional health education campaigns. The JSU coalition also incorporated strategies that engaged the community in all efforts to increase seat belt use. “No Matter How Far, No Matter Whose Car, Always Buckle Up” was the community messaging campaign slogan created to capture the attention and that would be easily remembered by each member of the target population. Billboards, television, radio and print media were purchased and placed in minority communities and near schools to engage families, schools, the faith community and other local institutions, organizations, and businesses to reinforce a “buckle up” message. The message was also conveyed during JSU home athletic events, (ex. football games). Research suggests that this type of messaging is likely to be more effective than a general teen communication campaign (Juarez, et al., 2006). The results of the study revealed that constant media (billboards, radio messages, etc.) reminders about seat belts usage made a difference in encouraging seat belt use among teens. Teen seat belt use was found to be the highest when there were active reminders, and that it falls off pretty significantly when the reminders are removed (Bishop-McLin, 2009).

Teen crashes are preventable. This public health crisis is easy to curb. A continued call to arms is needed by everyone to do everything possible to save the lives of teens, especially among high-risk male and minority teen drivers. Service learning and peer-to-peer education curriculums should be integrated into *every* school in this country at the elementary school, middle school, and high school levels. There needs to be an increase in collaborative efforts by everyone in the community: parents, teachers, physicians, clergy members, lawmakers, law enforcement and teens themselves to lower the number of teen deaths on roadways. Parents should set clear expectations and limitations for their teen drivers, along with the appropriate consequences for not following the rules. The loss of one life, is one too many. It only takes a few seconds to reach across to click your seat belt, or to look around your vehicle to make sure the seat belts of your passengers are buckled. No text or cell phone call is worth risking your life or the life of someone else. No one wants to lose another child, sibling, parent, aunt, uncle, niece, nephew, grandparent or friend to a tragedy that might have been prevented. By working together to promote and improve traffic safety in Mississippi, we can effectively impact the ultimate goal of reducing fatalities and injuries on “all” public roads in Mississippi. Every life is precious. Every Mississippian should have the opportunity to drive across this beautiful state, on any day of the week, during any month of the year and have the opportunity to arrive alive at their destinations.

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