

Chasing Cars - Teens Say Street Racing Poses Significant Risk

By Stephen Wallace, M.S. Ed.



Amid rising concerns about dangerous teen driving behaviors sits a common threat rarely considered outside of popular depictions in such movies as *Rebel Without a Cause*, *Grease*, and *The Fast and the Furious*: street racing.

Perhaps surprisingly, teens themselves rank street racing as one of the most risky in a slate of driving practices that lead to crashes, injuries, and, too often, deaths (between 2001 and 2006, 804 fatalities have been attributed to street racing, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration).

Indeed, a new study from Liberty Mutual Insurance and SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions) reveals that a vast majority of teens (97 percent) feel that street racing is dangerous, listing it above cell phone use, speeding, having more than three passengers in the car, being upset, using a GPS system, and changing clothes while driving.

Nevertheless, the research points out that more than one third of teen drivers (38 percent) say they have engaged in street racing.

That's bad news.

So, too, are media accounts of the consequences.

In Eagle Rock, California, four teens were killed (including three from one family) and another was critically

injured in what an LAPD lieutenant called "a high speed drag race," according to *egpnews*.

In Eugene, Oregon, a college football player required 75 stitches to close a gash in his head, the result of speed racing, said the Associated Press.

In Mountainside, New Jersey, an 18-year-old and a 20-year-old were killed after their Chevy Corvette crashed in a street race against a Chevy Camaro, reported My Central Jersey.

And on Staten Island in New York, seven teens were transported to the hospital after a street racing crash that ultimately claimed the life of a 17-year-old who succumbed to what WNBC4 referred to as severe head and internal injuries.

These stories merely scratch the surface of the death and destruction wrought by this alarming activity.

Fortunately, good news can be found in the fact that some states, including California, Massachusetts, and Illinois, are revisiting or introducing laws to better protect teen drivers – and, by extension – other motorists on our roads and highways.

- In California, drivers convicted of street racing face prison sentences of 30 days to 6 months and/or as much as \$1,000 in fines, if their offenses resulted in injury for someone other than themselves.
- In Massachusetts, a new law effective in February 2008 dictates that convicted street racers be

punished with up to 2½ years of jail time or a fine of up to \$1,000. Offenders also get their licenses suspended for up to 30 days for the first offense and 180 days for subsequent violations.

- In Illinois, current legislation states that driving privileges be revoked for any person convicted of street racing and that law enforcement may impound the offender's vehicle for up to five days.

As if street racing isn't enough to worry about, teen drivers also report engaging in other high-risk driving behaviors in startling numbers.

- 39 percent say they speed often
- 37 percent say they often talk on a cell phone when behind the wheel
- 30 percent say they often text message while driving

When you take "often" out of the equation, those numbers jump precipitously to 91 percent (speeding), 90 percent (talking on a cell phone), and 73 percent (text messaging) of teen drivers.

Of course, the drivers aren't the only ones in jeopardy. More than one quarter of teens indicate that they are frequently passengers in a car where such unsafe behaviors are taking place.

What's their responsibility?

Research shows that young drivers may be more likely to listen to their friends than to adults – so teen passengers need to be empowered to speak up when drivers are placing them, and others, at risk.

But, ironically, that may be easier said than done.

Despite the fact that so many teens feel that so many behaviors are dangerous, only about half of teens (57 percent) say they would ask a driver to stop engaging in even the most serious behaviors, such as street racing. Sad when you consider that most teen drivers say that if their friends asked, they would stop racing (87 percent), speeding (79 percent), text messaging (80 percent), or talking on a cell phone (68 percent).

Speaking up about slowing down will fuel peer-led persuasion to stop teens from chasing cars.

Stephen Wallace, national chairman and chief executive officer of SADD, Inc. (Students Against Destructive Decisions), has broad experience as a school psychologist and adolescent counselor. He is the author of the new book Reality Gap: Alcohol, Drugs, and Sex — What Parents Don't Know and Teens Aren't Telling. For more information about SADD, visit sadd.org.