

FOCUS GROUPS

Focus groups were conducted with three groups: parents, young drivers or prospective young drivers, and driver education instructors. This summary highlights the main issues discussed in these focus groups.

Responses from parents, young drivers, and driver instructors highlighted that young drivers were inexperienced, tended to be reckless and to drive over the speed limit. However, almost everyone, especially young drivers, warned against generalizations, and asserted that not all young drivers are reckless or irresponsible. Most respondents also indicated that young drivers, in their unsafe driving practices, are motivated by a sense of invincibility, desire to show off, peer pressure, inexperience, and distraction.

Some of the responses from parents and driver instructors pointed to changes that have taken place with society in general and youth in particular over the past few decades. Youth now seem to have more places to drive, the demands on them to drive are stronger, and their vehicles are much faster and more risky if not handled carefully.

On the differences between drivers ages 16 to 17 versus drivers ages 18 to 20, most adults indicated that the older drivers had more experience, and were safer drivers. Young drivers did not necessarily agree with such characterization, as they found that even some older young drivers act reckless and irresponsible, now that they think they have enough experience.

In terms of the efforts by various governmental agencies, young drivers viewed the judicial referrals to driver education classes to be ineffective, as these classes do not provide what they are intended to provide. In addition, some young drivers thought that the court system treats them more harshly than older drivers. Young drivers and parents equally wished for more educational efforts, and for changes in the driver education curriculum to include more behind the wheel practice. Some adult respondents wished that the courts would become stricter with young drivers who violate the law. Some young drivers expressed their wish for reducing insurance rates and gasoline prices.

Driver education instructors expressed the need to get parents more involved in their children's practice. They also described several ways by which they engage parents in their kids' driver education, including getting students to take their parents to check their car for various issues.

In terms of what other agencies and organizations are doing, most respondents, young and old, discussed the efforts made by MADD and SADD. They were aware of efforts made especially around prom time, as well as the use of videos and wrecked cars, to illustrate some of the risks associated with drinking and driving.

Concerning the role of parents, adult respondents acknowledged the significant role that could be played by parents. They described several techniques they use with their teenagers, including setting rules, applying sanctions, getting them to help with paying for the car expenses, and taking the time to help them practice and learn various driving skills. Young drivers stressed that parents must get involved in teaching their teenagers, and also in setting rules and following up on it.

When asked about what has been effective in addressing safety issues, adult respondents mentioned the designated driver concept, driver education in the school, legal consequences which included parent and kids going to a driver's program, and use of goggles and simulators showing how it feels to drive under the influence. Young drivers found that having the "kids" pay for their tickets is effective; further, using real life experience involving their peers describing the horror of crashes is an eye opener to many.

When asked about what needs to be done to improve young drivers' safety, adult respondents were divided on a variety of issues. For example, some favored setting nighttime restrictions or other types of restrictions. Some favored raising the driving age, limiting number of youth in the car, enforcing of curfew law rules related to young drivers, or extending the permit period. In all cases there were those who saw advantages, and those who saw disadvantages. Young drivers, similarly, were divided on several issues. Among these were extending the permit period, making the license dependent of school grades, and making licensing decisions on a personal basis. They all seemed to agree that more behind the wheel time was needed during the training period. There also seemed to be a consensus that more emphasis on seat belts, along with more emphasis on drinking and driving, is needed.

Finally, some respondents suggested more emphasis on improving educational methods to teach younger ones the new way of holding the steering wheel to ensure that the airbag will open properly. Further, they want to teach youth roadside skills such as how to change flat tires; "this is more important than books and videos in driver's education class."