

Editorial: Teen fatality rank should get attention

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News that the state of Tennessee ranks sixth in the nation in teenage driving deaths should spark lawmakers to review the state laws that deal with teenage driving.

The ranking comes from Allstate Insurance Co.'s study, "America's Teen Driving Hotspots," which was based on data from 2005-06 and released last week. The study cited speed and failure to use seat belts as the most common problems - both can land a teen in court.

Tennessee safety officials attributed the ranking to a lack of mandatory driver education, lack of seat belt use and texting while driving. A law prohibiting texting while driving was approved this year.

Tennessee adopted a graduated driver's license program several years ago. How much that has helped public safety over the years is open to question. However, driving fatalities have been down the last two years. Teenage drivers were involved in 10 fatal crashes in the state as of June 12, a figure on track to be a reduction from last year's total of 72, according to the Tennessee Department of Safety.

In the nine years from 2000 through 2008, the number of people killed in accidents involving teenage drivers has averaged more than 90 per year, passing 100 fatalities three times, the most recent in 2007.

To be sure, teenage driving is a recurring problem, but there are some options:

Like much else in life, good driving habits begin at home, and they begin by observation, imitation and habit long before a child turns 15 or 16. A parent who is a careful, considerate and safe driver establishes a positive and responsible standard for his teenage son or daughter.

Mandatory driver's education has been discussed but will require quite an effort by the state. "If we had mandatory driver education," said Kendell Poole of the Governor's Highway Safety Office, "we would be able to reduce teen fatalities across the state."

If this option is seriously considered, state officials should think about an alternative to burdening public school systems with the mandatory classes. Teaching Tennessee history should be mandatory for schools; different arrangements that might involve the schools but not put the onus on them can be made for driver's ed.

Raising the age for a learner's permit to 16 and a driver's license to 17 is being discussed in some states. Legislators would have to consider if this action will penalize the responsible teens who take driver's ed courses and pass the written tests.

For teens, the best way not to be the focus of attention every few years - and to stay safe and alive - is to practice all those good habits found in the state driving handbook and taught in driver's ed class. For parents, there is the option of exercising control and discipline for teens who drive too fast, don't use seat belts or believe they must use a cell phone whenever they drive.

For lawmakers, there are 90 tragic reasons each year to review the driving laws relating to teens.