

Wisconsin rules reduce teen driving deaths

A decision eight years ago by Wisconsin to limit passengers and nighttime driving for teens has paid off. Minnesota's Legislature is weighing similar measures.

By **RICHARD MERYHEW**, Star Tribune

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Minnesota need look no further than Wisconsin for strong evidence that license restrictions can dramatically cut the number of crashes involving teen drivers.

In the eight years since Wisconsin legislators imposed nighttime driving restrictions and set

passenger limits for 16- and 17-year-olds, the number of teen drivers involved in accidents there has fallen about 30 percent.

"I don't always say the Legislature does something right, but in this case it makes sense," said Dennis Hillstead, sheriff of St. Croix County. "It has had a definite impact on the number of accidents we see and injuries and fatalities involving our young people."

Minnesota is one of four states that have no restrictions for teen passenger limits and nighttime driving, according to AAA. But a series of horrifying crashes and deaths involving teen drivers in Minnesota has state legislators pushing for change.

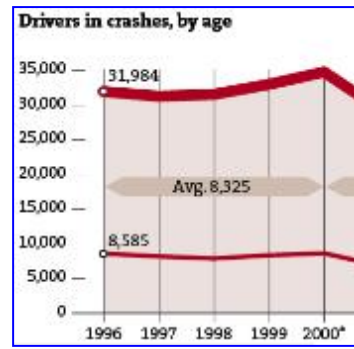
The Minnesota House and Senate have both approved provisions that would restrict night driving and passenger loads for teens, though a final version of the bill remains to be worked out.

Dozens of studies have shown that teens, particularly 16-year-olds, are more likely to die in a motor vehicle crash than by any other cause.

"Historically, and it's still true, they are the worst drivers on the road," said Dennis Hughes, chief of safety programs for the Wisconsin State Patrol. "And year in and year out, they are overrepresented in crashes."

About 6 percent of Wisconsin's drivers are 16 to 19, according to the State Patrol. That group accounts for about 16 percent of all crashes in the state, Hughes said.

"It's the way they get killed," said Gordy Heirlmeier, a driver's education instructor in Glenwood City, Wis. "And if we don't educate them properly, then what are we doing?"



► **Graphic:** Teen driving crash involvements decline

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When she was a student at Hudson High School in the mid-'80s, Tiedemann and her friends often piled into a car and headed out of town for Friday night basketball games. One night, on the way home from a game in Menomonie, "we ended up in the ditch," Tiedemann said. "It just happened. Nobody was hurt, but we were just not paying attention."

Now the mother of a 17-year-old girl, Tiedemann likes the fact that by law, her daughter Beth can't pile into a car with friends and take off the way she once did. The after-midnight driving restrictions also make it easy for parents to enforce curfews, she said.

"It kind of takes a little pressure off the parent because you want the car in the driveway at midnight," said Tiedemann.

Beth Tiedemann, who got her license a year ago and describes herself as a cautious driver, said the restrictions have helped her stay focused on the road.

"One of my favorite rules is that you can only have one passenger in the car," she said. "When I have people or friends behind me, I have a tendency to kind of look behind me and talk."

Hughes, of the Wisconsin State Patrol, said a study several years ago at the University of Wisconsin-Madison revealed another unexpected benefit: the tougher GDL programs discouraged some teenagers from getting their licenses at 16. Some Wisconsin kids are putting off driving now until they are 18, when they are more likely to be prepared for the responsibility, he said.

Klatt said the tougher laws reinforce the message that driving "is more of a privilege than a right."

"It opens their eyes a little bit that it is a serious issue."

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Graphic: Teen driving crash involvements decline

