

**Summary:**

## **Young car passengers as guardian angels**

### **Factors influencing adolescent passengers' willingness to influence young drivers**

The aim of the present study was to examine factors that may affect the likelihood of adolescent passengers asking a driver to drive more carefully when they feel unsafe or worried in the car. The study consists of a literature review and two empirical studies (focus group interviews and a survey study) carried out among Swedish adolescents 17 to 20 years of age.

### **Literature review**

Several studies show that young drivers' accident risk increase when they are accompanied by passengers about their own age, but not when they carry children or persons over 25 years of age. One explanation of this increase in accident risk is that young drivers may become distracted when they carry young passengers, and hence, make more driver errors. However, young drivers' accident risk covaries systematically with passengers' age and gender. For instance, the accident risk is found to be especially high when both the driver and the passenger(s) are young males. Several studies demonstrate that young drivers are more prone to speeding and risk-taking when they are accompanied by young male passengers. As a result, it is reasonable to believe that the negative effect of carrying young passengers may, to some extent, be due to intentional risk-taking.

On the other hand, some studies suggest that adolescent passengers can influence the driver to drive more carefully and thereby reduce the risk of accidents. A few safety campaigns have aimed at promoting this kind of positive influence through encouraging young passengers to speak out against unsafe driving when they ride with young drivers. The results of these campaigns do, however, indicate that adolescent passengers find it easier to avoid riding with unsafe drivers than to ask the driver to drive more carefully. Two survey studies have tried to identify what causes adolescents to refrain from addressing unsafe driving. The conclusion in these studies is that many adolescents refrain from addressing unsafe driving due to fear of a potential conflict with the driver and low confidence in own ability to influence the driver's behaviour.

## **Focus group interviews**

Three focus group interviews of 90 minutes' duration were carried out in the city of Linköping in Sweden. The participants consisted of 30 adolescents 17 to 20 years of age. The results of the interviews can be summarised as follows:

- Car driving has rational, as well as emotional aspects. These include increased mobility, independence, sense of freedom, joy, danger, and excitement. Car driving is also a way of obtaining a closer relationship to friends and spending spare time with them.
- Most of the participants reported that they had experienced unpleasant and/or dangerous situations when they had been riding with a young driver.
- The most common way of acting when one feels unsafe or anxious as a passenger, is to say nothing and instead avoid riding with the driver on later occasions.
- The fear of creating a conflict is the most important barrier against addressing unsafe driving. To ask the driver to drive more carefully is believed to be easily perceived as criticism. It is in general believed that it is inappropriate to behave in this way for a passenger - passengers should instead be grateful for being offered a lift.
- To address unsafe driving is regarded as more acceptable for a female passenger than for a male. This is mainly because young men may be perceived as feminine if they behave in such a matter. The presence of female passengers is considered to have a positive influence on both the driving and the atmosphere in the car.
- Being an acquaintance or not of the driver has a bearing on whether the adolescents decide to ride with the driver or dare to speak out against unsafe driving.
- As drivers, adolescents feel that they have a responsibility for the safety of their passengers, while the passengers often pass down their responsibility for safety to the driver. Passengers "trust" that the driver has control over the situation and knows what he or she is doing.
- Being under the influence of alcohol may result in more tolerance towards risk-taking and cause passengers to encourage drivers to speed and to conduct traffic violations.
- Passengers who do not themselves possess a driver licence find it harder to speak out against unsafe driving. This is mainly because they regard themselves as not competent enough to evaluate whether the driver drives in an unsafe manner. The barriers against speaking out are higher the more experienced the driver is and if the driver is older than the passengers.
- In general, adolescents report that they admire persons who dare to speak out against unsafe driving – such persons are regarded as independent persons who are confident in themselves.
- The adolescents believe that drivers should be encouraged to invite passengers to speak out when they feel unsafe or anxious. The passengers

must at the same time sense that they have the right to address unsafe driving when they feel unsafe in the car. Passengers must also learn to know that they have a responsibility for safety.

## **The survey study**

The questionnaire applied in the survey study was constructed on the basis of knowledge obtained in the literature review and the results from the focus group interviews. The questionnaire was sent out to a random sample of 1500 Swedish adolescents of 17 to 20 years of age in September 2004. A total of 774 respondents returned the questionnaire, yielding a response rate of 52 percent. The results of the survey study can be summarised as follows:

- Most of the respondents report that, at least once during the last year, they had felt anxious or afraid when being in a car with a young driver. However, most report that they had felt anxious or afraid only once or twice during the last year, suggesting that being afraid as a car passenger is rather the exception than the rule.
- The respondents reported that speeding frequently occurs when they are riding with young drivers, while more serious violations (like dangerous overtakings and close following) do not happen so often.
- The respondents report most risk-taking and violations when they are riding with young males. Likewise, male respondents who possess a drivers' licence admit conducting more violations and risk-taking than female drivers do.
- The presence of female passengers seems to have a positive influence on the drivers' behaviour. 40 percent of the male drivers report that they drive more slowly and conduct fewer violations when carrying young female passengers.
- About one-third of the adolescents report that they never or seldom ask the driver to drive more carefully when they think the driver is driving too fast or risky. It is more common to "solve" this problem in a non-confronting matter, e.g. to avoid riding with the driver on later occasions. Further analyses suggest that conflict avoidance and low belief in own ability to influence others are the most important reasons why they refrain from addressing unsafe driving.
- Young males are most worried about becoming unpopular or creating conflict if they should speak out against unsafe driving. At the same time, they have lower confidence in their own ability to influence others as compared to females. This is reflected in young males being more reluctant to speak out in situations when they think that the driving is too fast or too risky.
- The results suggest that the adolescents' fear of creating a conflict is exaggerated. Very few report that drivers actually have become annoyed when asked to drive more carefully. Adolescent drivers themselves claim that they would not be annoyed if one of their passengers asks them to drive more carefully.
- Many adolescents state that they would prefer to use public transport or taxis in situations (e.g. at night time in weekends) where they are offered a lift with an unsafe driver. This result suggests that making public transport more

accessible in weekends and at night (when adolescents have a high accident risk) may be an effective safety measure for adolescents.

- Adolescents who prefer excitement and risk-taking, and adolescents who have low respect for social norms and rules, are more prone than others to ride with unsafe drivers. These two groups do not report higher fear of conflict compared to other adolescents, however they report lower confidence in their own ability to influence drivers. Compared to others, they also refrain more often from addressing unsafe driving.
- It is concluded that one way of increasing confidence in own ability to influence others and to lower the fear of conflict, is to teach adolescents strategies to address unsafe driving. Role-playing and model-imitation are two relevant methods for learning and practicing such strategies.

## **Conclusion**

Even though feeling unsafe as a car passenger seems to be the exception rather than the rule, measures aimed at empowering adolescent passengers to speak of against unsafe driving can result in a reduction in the number of car accidents. There are two arguments behind this assertion. One is that international studies find that the accident risk increase when young drivers are accompanied by young passengers, especially males. This is most probably due to increased risk-taking and/or an increase in distraction. Secondly, speeding seems to be quite common in such situations. In view of studies finding a relatively strong relationship between speeding and risk of injury, it is expected that a reduction in injury risk will occur if passenger can promote safer driving practices.

Since speeding seems to occur frequently without passengers feeling unsafe or anxious for that reason, a relevant measure may be to inform adolescents about the increase in risk affecting young drivers when carrying passengers. Such information may possibly motivate both the driver and the passengers to be more safety-conscious when in the car together.

If decision makers aim at promoting positive social influence among adolescent car passengers, it is probably most relevant to implement measures aimed at reducing the fear of conflict and/or increasing adolescents' confidence in their own ability to influence drivers' behaviour. Some examples of this kind of interventions are described in the report, but it is difficult to determine the effectiveness of such interventions since they have not yet been formally evaluated.

Since many adolescents seem to find it hard to ask drivers to drive more carefully, an additional measure to reduce accidents among adolescents may be to make public transport more available at times when the accident risk is at its highest, meaning at night time during weekends.