

Young women at growing risk of drunk-driving crashes

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Underage female drinkers have been at a growing risk of fatal car crashes in recent years -- so much that they've caught up with their male counterparts, according to a study in the May issue of the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*.

Back in 1996, the U.S. had a gender split when it came to underage drinkers' odds of being involved in a fatal car crash: at any given blood-alcohol level, young men had a higher risk of a fatal crash than young women did. But by 2007, the new study found, that [gender gap](#) had closed.

The exact reasons are not clear. But it's possible that young women are taking greater risks on the road.

"Young women who drink and drive may be behaving more like young men who drink and drive," says lead researcher Robert B. Voas, Ph.D., of the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation in Calverton, Maryland.

The total number of [young men](#) involved in fatal alcohol-related wrecks is still greater because men drink more. But at a given blood-alcohol level, Voas says, young women now appear to have the same risk of a fatal crash as their male peers do.

The findings are based on information from a government reporting system on fatal traffic accidents nationwide. The researchers compared

blood-alcohol information from nearly 6,900 [fatal crashes](#) in 2006 with information from about 6,800 U.S. drivers who were part of the 2007 U.S. National Roadside Survey.

Overall, the risk of being killed or at least involved in a fatal crash rose as drivers' blood alcohol levels climbed -- whatever their age.

Among underage drinkers (16- to 20-year-olds), having a blood-alcohol level of .02% to .049% translated into a nearly threefold greater risk of being involved in a fatal crash, relative to sober drivers the same age. And their odds of dying in a single-vehicle crash were almost fourfold higher.

What was remarkable, Voas and his colleagues say, was that by 2007, underage men and women had similar risks at each given blood-alcohol level. That's in contrast to findings from a decade earlier -- when underage men were at about a twofold greater risk than [young women](#) with the same blood-alcohol level.

The findings, Voas says, underscore the need for drunk-driving prevention education in school, for both boys and girls.

But the study also turned up another concerning pattern, notes study co-author Eduardo Romano, Ph.D.: sober male drivers ages 16 showed a doubling in the risk of a fatal car crash between 1996 and 2007.

Again, it's not clear why, Romano says. "But we speculate that it may have a lot to do with distraction," he says. "Sober kids are more at risk, and we think it may be related to texting and the other new technologies they are using so much."

If so, the researchers say, that points to a need not only for drunk-driving prevention but also efforts to curb "distracted driving."

More information: Voas, R. B., Torres, P., Romano, E., & Lacey, J. H. (May 2012). Alcohol-related risk of driver fatalities: An update using 2007 data. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs*, 73(3), 341.

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