

I will never forget the first time I rode in the car with my friend who had just gotten her license. I was overflowing with excitement. *Freedom is finally here*, I thought. I ran out of the front door as her car pulled into my driveway.

“Hit the road,” I squealed in delight as I plopped in her passenger seat for our maiden voyage.

The GPS was directing us to the mall. My friend blasted Taylor Swift’s latest album as we loudly sang along. I rolled the window down, allowing the breeze to wind its way through my hair.

Suddenly, we began to drift over the double yellow line. I was horrified when I glanced over at my friend staring down at her phone.

“HEY!” I screamed.

Her eyes darted up as a semi-truck blared its horn at us. Panic stricken, she yanked the wheel back. We narrowly watched our life flash before our eyes. The force of the passing truck shook not only our car, but our spines to the core.

I was petrified. We had almost died less than five minutes after leaving the house.

“What were you doing?” I interrogated my friend with a harsh tone quite opposite of my usual timid and sweet demeanor.

“I was cancelling my nail appointment,” she admitted sheepishly.

I was rendered speechless, as I stared at her in disbelief. My eyes shot daggers in her direction.

“You almost got us killed for that?” I continued to press for answers she didn’t have. The remainder of the trip was unusually quiet.

*What can I do to fix this?* I thought to myself.

Distracted driving is a worldwide epidemic, particularly in the United States. CDC data shows that teen drivers are more likely to have a fatality while driving distracted. That same data set shows there is no difference between A students and C students. All teens are impacted. Those who texted are also more likely to display other high-risk behaviors, such as not wearing a seatbelt or driving under the influence of alcohol.

Teen drivers also lack experience. Navigating a left turn across busy traffic or crossing multiple lanes of highway traffic all become easier with experience.

I see a future where teen drivers are safer. While it requires teens to take responsibility for their actions, it's also about giving them proper tools to implement safety measures. Here are three action items I would recommend to improve safety outcomes.

Distracted driving is the most prevalent problem amongst teens. Modern phones include a "do not disturb" function that mutes notifications. I believe it should be taken further for teenagers. We should remove the option to use the screen while the car is in motion. That will limit the urgency to respond to text messages, look on snapchat, or respond to emails. The ability to receive calls would still be an option. However, anything that involves looking at the screen would be disabled. I believe this first step would be extremely helpful in decreasing distracted drivers.

The second hazard is peer pressure and risk-taking behaviors that teenagers naturally face. Teens are more likely to drive faster and more recklessly. They have less understanding of road rules and regulations. They may speed at times where it is clearly more dangerous, like in a school zone or during inclement weather. I recommend implementing specific license plates for cars driven by teenagers. These "special" plates would allow police officers to

provide stricter enforcement of speeding and other laws with newer drivers that may have a propensity to break these rules. When drivers can prove their competence over a specified period of time without violation, they can graduate to a standard license plate.

Finally, I recommend a financial incentive to teen drivers. If certain teens do not have any violations or accidents during the “probationary” period, they will receive a tax refund regardless of income levels. Rather than punishing those without the means, we could incentivize and reward all teenagers that work hard to drive safely and maintain the rules of the road. Perhaps they would also positively peer pressure others to do better.

I strongly believe that implementing these three ideas, along with the current laws in place, will create a better future for teens and other drivers on the road. I hope future teens will avoid the white knuckle scene I endured on what should have been a most fun first adventure. Let’s all come together and make the roads a safer place for all!