

Interview: Bruce Simons-Morton discusses how male teen driving habits change with passenger

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ALEX CHADWICK, host:

This is DAY TO DAY. I'm Alex Chadwick.

If you're driving right now, take a look in that rearview mirror. If the object you see is closer than you think it should be, maybe there's a teen-age male driving with another teen-age male passenger. According to the National Institutes of Health, that combination leads to higher incidence of speeding and tailgating, as does a female driver and a female passenger. The study's published online and will appear in the journal *Accident Analysis & Prevention*. Its chief author at the NIH is Bruce Simons-Morton.

Bruce Simons-Morton, welcome to DAY TO DAY. And tell us, what made you think that risky driving among teens has to do with a car's passenger?

Mr. BRUCE SIMONS-MORTON (National Institutes of Health): Well, we know from the crash data that teens are at high risk relative to adults, particularly in crashes involving excessive speed and close following and in the presence of teen passengers. So we wanted to see how common it was for teens to drive fast and close to other cars.

CHADWICK: And what you discover is really interesting. It is that if a boy is driving with a girl in the front passenger seat, he's going to drive more responsibly.

Mr. SIMONS-MORTON: This was kind of a surprise to us. In general, teens drove faster and allowed less frontal headway--that is, they were closer to the car in front of them--than the usual traffic of other drivers. Males, however, in the presence of a female teen passenger drove pretty much the way usual traffic did.

CHADWICK: So it really changed their driving habits.

Mr. SIMONS-MORTON: Substantially. Conversely, male teen drivers with a male teen passenger were the worst case. They drove faster, they allowed less frontal headway and they were responsible for most of the risky driving behavior that we observed.

CHADWICK: But the same does not hold true if it is a teen-age female, a girl driving, and there's a boy in the front seat.

Mr. SIMONS-MORTON: Boy passengers have a negative effect on both male and female teen drivers, but more so with a male teen driver than with a female.

CHADWICK: Do you know why that is?

Mr. SIMONS-MORTON: There are several possible explanations for why teen passengers should increase driving risk. One is that it's a social influence, either an intentional one where the passenger sort of says, 'Catch up' or 'Slow down,' or an unintentional one where the passenger is being him or herself but the driver feels like they should change their behavior. Or it could be a distraction thing. The passenger could be distracting the driver either intentionally or not intentionally just by being busy in the car on a cell phone or whatever.

CHADWICK: Do you have teen-age children, Bruce Simons-Morton?

Mr. SIMONS-MORTON: Yes, I do.

CHADWICK: You do? Can you imagine yourself as a dad saying, 'OK. You're going to go out and you're going to borrow the car. You're going to go here or there or even out on a date. No boys allowed in the front seat.'

Mr. SIMONS-MORTON: With our own children, we limited teen passengers to zero for the first three months of driving and one passenger for the first six months of driving. Our teens didn't like it very much, but they're good kids. They're compliant. They understood why we were doing it, and they were very safe.

CHADWICK: But despite your own findings in this study, you haven't tried to make a rule as regards a teen-age male passenger.

Mr. SIMONS-MORTON: Right. We did not. We didn't have these data when my kids were novice teen drivers, which they no longer are. And would I make that distinction now, I think that the best recommendation is to limit teen passengers, both males and females, to zero or one for at least several months after teens begin to drive and to limit the numbers thereafter.

CHADWICK: Bruce Simons-Morton is chief author of a study from the National Institutes of Health on teen-age driving, speaking with us from Rockville, Maryland.

Bruce, thank you.

Mr. SIMONS-MORTON: You're welcome.

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