

Does Driver's Ed. Lead to More Car Crashes?

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09/08/2010 | 10:15 am

Indiana lawmakers say the state's driver education program isn't working, citing a fractured system administered by three separate agencies and statistics that put the program's usefulness in doubt.

Yes, it's a bit of a political issue ...

Public affairs director Sarah Meyer of the Indiana Bureau of Motor Vehicles told a group of state lawmakers last week that a study of current drivers under 18 showed those who took driver's education had nearly four times the crashes that those who didn't take the classes had.

But hey, there are statistics to back it up:

Nearly 5 percent of the 51,000 teens who took driver's education had one or more reported accidents, compared with 1 percent of the 71,932 drivers without formal driver training.

Is driver's ed. a menace to society? At least one politician asked the obvious question: *"Why do we even offer driver's education?" asked Rep. Phil Hinkle, R-Indianapolis, after hearing the statistics.*

Indeed, lots of government-run programs don't produce the intended result. And the safety value of driver's education has been challenged before. But is it really possible that sitting in a driver's-ed. class makes you four times more dangerous?

Maybe the courses give young drivers false confidence that makes them more dangerous? Or maybe the instruction is really bad?

Or maybe there's a selection bias at work here, whereby the drivers who take driver's ed. (whether by choice or not) have different characteristics than the drivers who don't.

Or maybe, more believably (to me at least), the statistics above obscure one salient fact: drivers who take a driver's ed. course are allowed to drive at a younger age than drivers who haven't taken a course.

There might be a lot of reasons to critique a driver's-ed. program, but one of them should not be that you are shocked – shocked! – that turning more young drivers loose on the roads may result in more accidents.

Comments:

Or..... Maybe students who have taken Drivers Education understand the importance of reporting an accident and the consequences of not reporting. In addition, they are probably

more prone to carry proper insurance (parents have more \$\$ to protect). Maybe some racial / income bias as well??? Thoughts??

There could be a location bias. For example, young drivers who live in rural areas may be less likely than young drivers in urban areas to be involved in an accident. This may occur regardless of whether the driver has taken driver's education. Can we add a variable titled "population of area in which accident occurred" to the equation? There are a few other proxies – I suppose the overall accident rate, including adults, might be useful as well.

There is a section in "Nurture Shock" about the failure of Drivers' Ed. In the studies the authors cite, it seems to make very little difference to safety, and they argue that it is because Drivers' Ed teaches driving technique effectively, but that accidents are caused, by and large, by poor decisions; driving while tired or distracted, showing off for friends, etc.

Perhaps NOT taking the class correlates with having an engaged parent who is willing to do the training himself/herself, and the presence of a parent (and the absence of classmates) in the car is a better way to learn how to drive safely.

And while on the subject of comparing like with like, what's the comparison in distance travelled per year? This could be like the other driving classic that 'women make safer drivers' which overlooks the fact that, on the whole, male drivers tend to drive a vast number more miles every year.

Dubner writes "Or maybe there's a selection bias at work here..." Bingo – we have a winner. As one of my colleagues likes to say, endogeneity is where you find it...

But following the link provided shows that in Indiana there is only 3 months difference between the age at which one can obtain a license with successful completion of a driver education program versus without.

I find it easy to believe that 16-year-olds are, on average, less skilled or careful drivers than 21-year-olds or 40-year-olds, but can there really be *that much* difference between 16 years 6 months and 16 years 9 months?