

Student drinking 'still major issue'

Teens and driving

Motor vehicle crashes are the **leading** cause of teen fatalities

1 in 4 fatalities involves a 16-to 24-year-old driver

87% of the 6,000 teens who die every year from motor vehicle crashes were distracted behind the wheel

61% of teenage passenger deaths happened when another teen was driving

One out of every five licensed 16-year-old drivers will be in a vehicle crash

The **first year** of unsupervised driving is the most dangerous. The crash risk for teens drops more than **two-thirds** after the first 1,500 miles of independent driving

In 2008, **25%** of drivers ages 15 to 20 who died in motor vehicle crashes had a blood alcohol count of 0.08 or higher

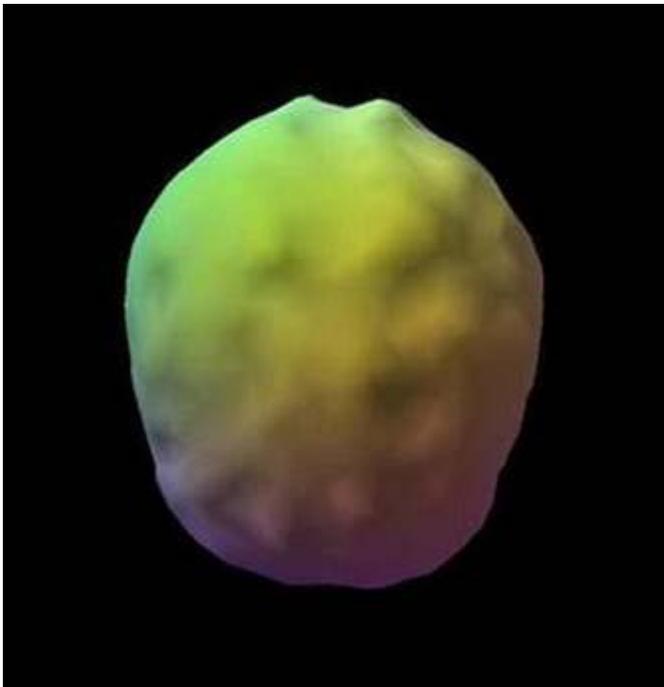
Approximately **two-thirds** of teens killed in vehicle crashes in 2003 were not wearing seat belts

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Sources: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention; Children's Hospital of Philadelphia; Allstate Insurance; Insurance Institute for Highway Safety; McCartt, Shabanova, & L National Highway Traffic Safety Administration T&G Staff/DON LAND

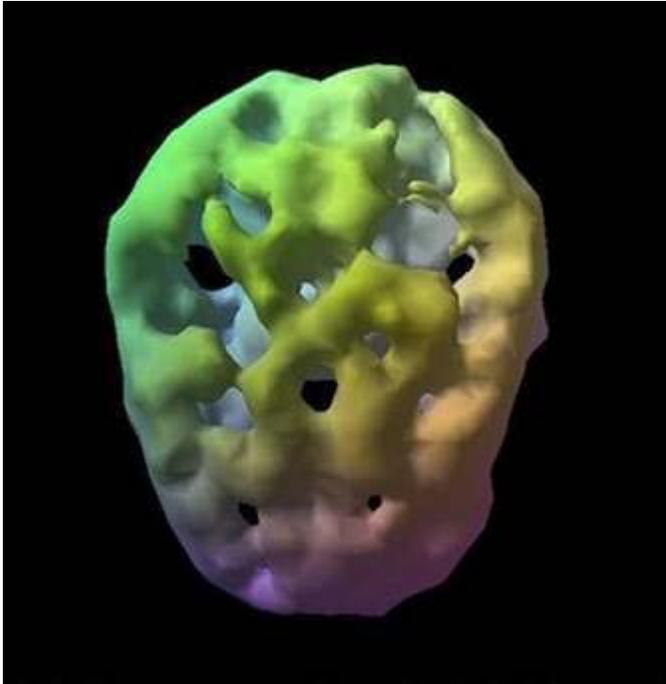
By Priyanka Dayal TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

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This image of the top view of a normal brain shows blood flow to the brain. (BRAIN INJURY ASSOCIATION OF MASSACHUSETTS)

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This image shows a brain with restricted blood flow after many years of heavy drinking.

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WESTBORO — Teenagers seem to be more comfortable discussing underage drinking with adults, but teen alcohol use is still a problem, according to the high school and Police Department.

“We’re being more open now in talking about issues kids are going through,” said Melissa C. Callender, physical education and wellness teacher at Westboro High School. “The school is more involved now in (discussing) the bad decisions kids are making on the weekends.”

A large number of high school students drink alcohol, Ms. Callender said. She said she knows several kids don’t drink, but “it seems like everyone’s doing it.”

Earlier this year, Police Chief Alan R. Gordon warned of an increase in underage drinking parties. He said the problem has not gone away, and students caught drinking at this time of year risk missing proms and graduation.

“It’s still a major issue,” he said. “It’s always been an issue and will continue to be.”

The chief said the schools are doing a fine job addressing the issue, but some parents need to play a bigger role steering kids in the right direction. “We’re not their baby sitter,” he said.

Alcohol is the substance most commonly used by teenagers in Westboro, according to the 2008 MetroWest Adolescent Health Survey. Thirty-nine percent of students

reporting drinking in the past 30 days, and 24 percent reporting binge drinking, which is defined as having five or more drinks in a row. By Grade 12, more than half use alcohol and 40 percent binge drink.

Also, teen marijuana use is on the rise, according to the 2008 survey.

Pamela M. Bush, communications director at the Brain Injury Association of Massachusetts, applauded the way Westboro High is addressing alcohol and drug use problems.

One of the steps the school has taken is offering programs such as the one held yesterday, in which Sabrina Fanger of the Brain Injury Association taught students how alcohol and drugs can “mess with” brain development. She also discussed car safety.

“Your brains right now are still developing, still growing ... so they’re most vulnerable, most easily hurt right now,” Ms. Fanger told a classroom of students.

She asked them what they thought of the drinking age in the United States. Students gave all the expected answers: Europeans can drink by 18. Eighteen-year-olds in this country can vote and fight in wars, so they should be able to drink. Because drinking is illegal for teenagers, they’re forced to hide it, which leads to bad situations.

But Ms. Fanger told the somewhat skeptical group that the minimum drinking age of 21, according to various studies, works. “This law actually saves lives,” she said.

She showed an image of a normal brain, followed by a much different-looking picture — the brain of a heavy drinker. In the alcohol user’s brain, the image showed blood not flowing to all the right places. Frequent marijuana use causes similar problems, Ms. Fanger said.

Senior Nick Fotos, 18, was struck by those images. “We’ve gotten this (information) a lot before, but the pictures of the brain, that was different,” he said after class. “I don’t think people really think about that before using drugs and alcohol. It’ll make me think more now.”

Alcohol and marijuana use are “pretty common” at the high school, he said, “probably because of peer pressure.”

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