

# **Youth Involvement In Traffic Accidents In Japan-New Trends**

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## **Abstract**

Alcohol use and abuse among Japanese youths are sources of widespread concern to the public. An estimated 12% have problems with alcohol and about 1 out of every 25 adolescent's will eventually become an alcoholic. According to a recent national survey, 88% of high school seniors reported that they had tried alcohol. Although all of these students are under the legal drinking age, experience with alcohol is rampant. Motor vehicle traffic accidents are a leading cause of death among children, adolescents and young adults between 5 and 24 years of age, and more than 14,000 people were killed in such accidents according to the 1998 vital statistics in Japan. Unlike major causes of deaths such as malignant neoplasm's and heart diseases and despite the critical problem in public health, there are few epidemiological studies on youth involvement in traffic accidents in Japanese society. This note suggests that traffic related problems among youths in Japan as a reflect of differential inducements to drink and drive for example in new patterns of alcohol use and high dependence on the private automobiles. The problem may also reflect the incompetence of alcohol control policies, not only the traditional ones based on criminal law but also those based in alcohol policy, transportation policy, and other approaches. Those persons and organizations in position to influence new legislation's should consider enactment of regulations such as, lower legal BAC limit, night time curfews, graduate licensing systems and abolition of two hundred thousand (200,000) alcohol vending machines to prevent youth traffic accident in Japan.

Key words : Lower BAC limit, Graduate Licensing Program, New policies.

## **Introduction**

Postwar traffic accident deaths in 1995 topped the 500,000 mark. The death toll far exceeds the combined number of people who were killed in the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The total number of accidents were 22 million and nearly 26 million people have been injured. In each of the 8 years upto 1998, more than 10,000 people died in traffic accidents. The statistics by the National Police Agency are based on the number of deaths that occurred within 24 hours after an accident. The toll rises by about 20% to 30% when an international standard of counting deaths within 30 days of an accident is applied. This is a very serious situation when one pauses to think about it. But Japanese society accepts this fact calmly and tolerate such adverse

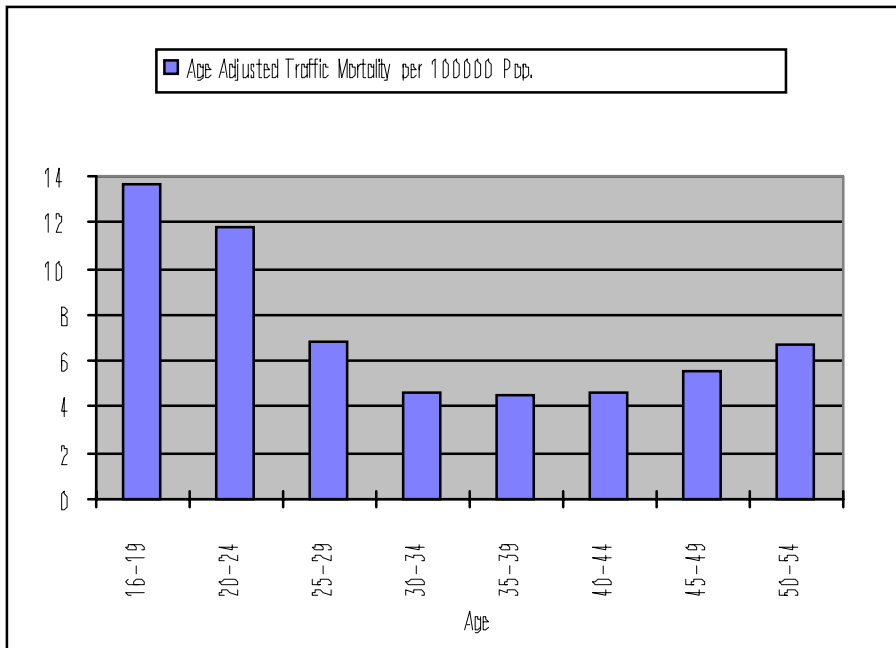
effects in exchange for the convenience and comfort that motor vehicles offer ? Although we cannot deny the usefulness of motor vehicles, the distortions of the motor vehicle society will continue to rapidly grow unless we do something to put a stop to the ever-increasing number of cars, in particular privately owned cars and limit their use. Motor vehicle traffic accidents are a leading cause of death among children, adolescents and young adults between 15 and 24 years of age in Japan. The trend toward the frequent occurrence of traffic accidents due to drunk-driving is a universal fact especially in Japan more youths are involved in drunk-driving and related problems (Shimizu, 1991). Because impaired driving is prevalent among young adults, effective strategies have the potential to be particularly important for this group. In the 1970s, called a period of “traffic war”, traffic accidents caused by physically and mentally immature young people, who formed a high percentage of the population because of the second baby boom, had already shown a drastic increase (Mori and Mizohata,1995).

Traumatic injury is responsible for more deaths among adolescents and young adults age 15-24 than all other causes combined. In addition, it is a common notion that drinking and driving is predominantly a youth problem (Homel,1988). Youths are regarded as having higher crash risk in relation to alcohol because of their inexperience in drinking combined with their inexperience in driving. Because of their inexperience in driving, young persons are at greater risk per miles driven of fatal crash involvement than older drivers. Furthermore each alcoholic drink consumed before driving increases the fatal crash risk for younger drivers under 21 even more than for older drivers (Zador,1991).

### **Data Sources**

The Data Base utilized in this study is the traffic accident data base maintained by the Traffic Bureau of National Police Agency. This data base consists of all reported accidents and fatalities which have occurred since 1960. In addition drivers licence data were obtained from the Ministry of Transportation.

Figure 1: Age adjusted traffic mortality per 100000 population in 1998

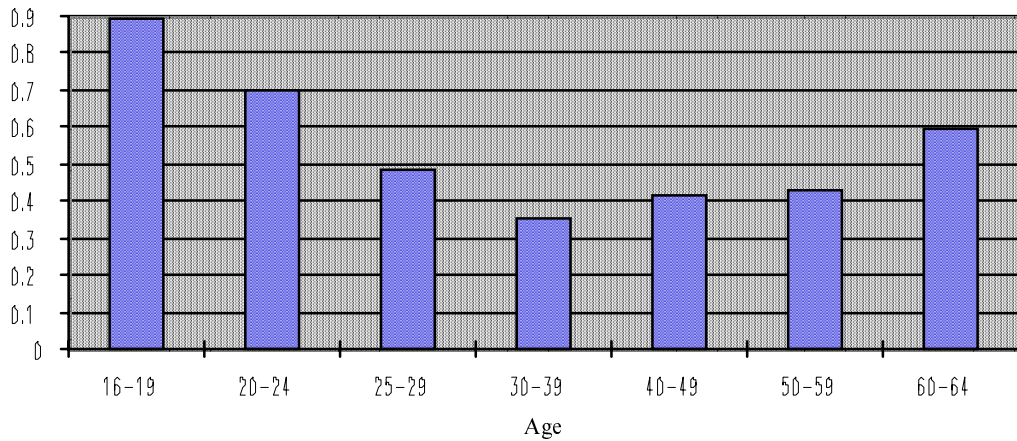


Source: Traffic Bureau, National Police Agency

Traumatic injury is responsible for more deaths among Japanese adolescents and young adults age 16-24 than other causes combined.

Figure 2

Traffic deaths UIA per 100,000 license driver:

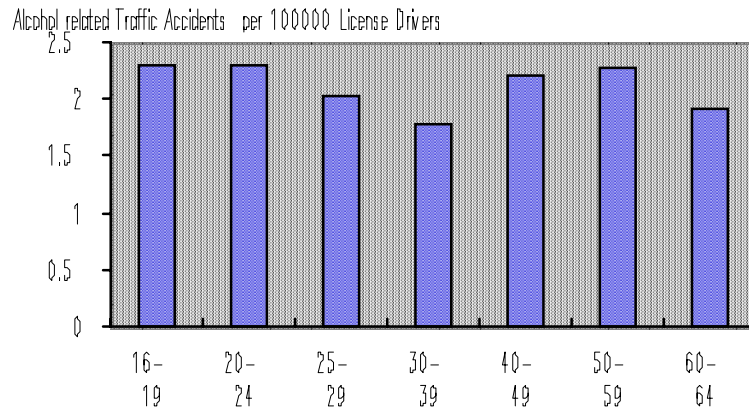


Source: Traffic Bureau, National Police Agency

Driving inexperience and immaturity are considered to be the main causes of motor vehicle crashes among drivers ages 16 to 24, even when alcohol is not involved. Young people's lack of driving experience renders them less likely than more experienced drivers to cope successfully with hazardous situations. This, combined with a penchant for risk-taking driving behavior such as speeding along with a

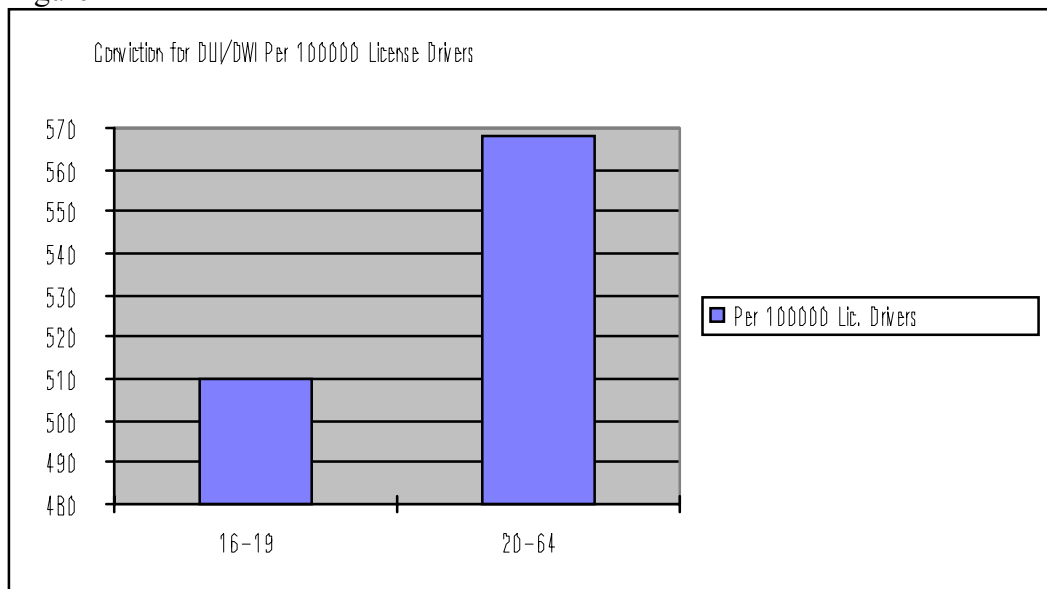
tendency both to underestimate the dangerous consequences of such behaviors and to overestimate their driving skill contributes to the high death rate among young drivers. In 1998, according to the National Police Agency, drivers 15-19 years old comprised 2.8 percent of licensed drivers but accounted for 9.52 percent of all fatalities.

Figure 3



Source: Traffic Bureau, National Police Agency

Figure 4



Source: Traffic Bureau, National Police Agency

In 1998, more than 12,000 teens were convicted for driving under influence (DUI) of alcohol and 67 teens were convicted for driving while impaired (DWI) offense (Traffic Statistics, National Police Agency, 1998). Hence, it would appear that many adolescents who drive after drinking are likely to be a social rebels who ignore both traffic laws as well as alcohol beverage control laws.

## **Discussion**

The Association for selling alcohol through vending machines will replace all alcohol vending machines with new models that require ID cards which carry names and birthdays by May 2000. This results a mounting appeals from the public for abolition of the machines used at present and growing number of minors have been blamed for alcohol related traffic accidents. In Japan, the law on one hand restricts adolescent drinking while on the other hand mass media promotes teenage drinking by effective ways and means. Beer advertising is so pervasive in Japanese society that children are unlikely to be able to avoid it. We must admit that in Japan the economy has basically been given political priority over other areas and health and welfare policies have rather followed economic ones. Availability of alcohol is virtually unlimited with easy access, especially to adolescence and price is very low due to a strong Japanese currency. Thus Japan must be the country with the easiest access to alcoholic drinks.

Alcohol related problems of the youths are increasing due to the fact that policies which are aimed at controlling them are not effective. The failure of adolescent drinking prohibition law can explain in part by the societal acceptance of alcohol generally and the relative dis-interest in controlling its legal use. Relaxing of alcohol related regulations further in 1994 has been accomplished to increase the availability of alcohol. One key issue in the de-regulation of alcohol production and sale has been the extent to which alcohol should be freely available in entire society. While there is conclusive evidence to point to a link between the levels of alcohol consumption and the number of alcohol related problems, de-regulation of the alcohol industry would be expected to further growth as policy makers are under great pressure to liberalized the market internationally as well as local.

Importance of the overall approach to prevent traffic fatalities has been emphasized by Shimizu in 1991. This study has further confirmed the deleterious effect of speed and alcohol use and the protective effect of seat belt and helmet use. It is proposed that not only education of the public but also intensive supervision of speed, alcohol use, and seat belt and helmet use legislation will reduce the occurrence of motor vehicle traffic accidents, which will then result in the reduction of fatalities.

There is clearly a need for public health officials and policy makers to learn more about how to reduce traffic related health and social problems among youths. We must make significant structural changes in young driver laws, training and development to maintain and increase our safety gains. Any successful attempt to reduce the extent of impaired driving and riding with impaired drivers among youth must be rooted in and understanding of the factors that predispose, reinforce and enable these behaviors. Legislative and policy actions can be effective in reducing the crashes including : lower BAC legal limit legislation for youths, eliminating deficiencies in and vigorously enforcing minimum purchase ages laws ; decreasing alcohol availability to youth by abolishing 200000 alcohol vending machines. International experience shows that the most effective combination is strict laws,

extensive enforcement and intensive and targeted educational campaigns. Prevention programs can operate more effectively when they are blend by good laws and extensive enforcement. Parents also can play a role in preventing teens from drinking and driving. Permissive or neutral attitudes toward underage drinking are associated with underage alcohol use, at least among males. Attitude change is a vital component in influencing anti drinking and driving behavior. Education based prevention campaigns that have been found to be successful have focused the information in way which encourages youth to change their attitudes toward drinking and driving and riding with an impaired driver. For young drivers, risk of crash involvement begins to increase at very low blood alcohol concentrations (BACs), and studies suggest that any measurable BAC can result in a significantly increased risk for younger drivers . Thus the gap between risky and illegal BACs for youth in most countries are large, and 'safe' consumption guidelines publicized for adults may be dangerously misleading for youth.

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