SWOV ARTICLE
August 2012

Photo: Paul Voorham

Adolescents in traffic: a closer look at risky behaviour

Compared with other age groups, adolescents, youths aged 10-17, die from unnatural causes much more frequently. The majority are boys rather than girls, and the cause of death is often a traffic crash. What is the reason that it is adolescents in particular who so often die in traffic? This question is answered in the recently published SWOV fact sheet *Risky road user behaviour among young adolescents*.

Adolescence

Adolescence is the period between childhood and adulthood. Compared with older adolescents (18-24 years old), young adolescents (10-17 years old) exhibit more risky behaviour. Because of their physical and mental development, young adolescents are more attracted to risky challenges, they are more susceptible to peer pressure, and they have less self-control and a less adequate understanding of situations than older adolescents. Several factors contribute to the rise in risky behaviour in adolescence, but the major factors are inexperience and deliberate risk taking. Implications for intervention strategies are discussed.

Skills

In the Netherlands, secondary school pupils have already travelled quite some distance by bike. It is therefore assumed that there is nothing wrong with their skills, but that they lack in willingness to behave safely. That this approach is too one-sided is illustrated by a study into the behaviour of young cyclists (11-13 years old) in the vicinity of trucks and the way they took account of the blind spot of trucks. The study showed that the majority of the youths could correctly identify the blind spots, but that the transfer of this knowledge into practical choices was very inadequate. This illustrates that inexperience can be an important component in the risky behaviour of adolescents in complex traffic situations, and that, in addition to vehicle control, especially the higher order skills like hazard perception are essential under these circumstances. The higher order skills take much longer to develop than the skills that are required for vehicle control. The limited experience of this age group and the slow development of higher order skills probably also are important factors in moped crashes. The consequences, in combination with the risky behaviour of adolescents can be seen in Figure 1: among adolescents, especially young males, traffic is an important cause of death.

Deliberate risky behaviour

Little research has been done into the exact nature and scope of deliberate risky traffic behaviour of adolescents. However, research has established that boys more so than girls, for example do not find it very important to obey the rules, that they do not find it very important whether or not they participate in traffic while being under the influence of alcohol or drugs, and that they feel less responsibility for the safety of others. Young men more frequently than young women also say that the display risky behaviour in traffic. In addition, age peers have an influence on risky behaviour. As it is increasingly important to be member of

a group, adolescents are more likely to display risky behaviour when they are in the company of age peers than when they are alone.

Behaviour improvement

Different approaches and measures can be used to prevent hazardous traffic behaviour. Several factors are important in the choices made in relation with young adolescents. The general increase in the different categories of unnatural deaths among adolescents indicates that the problem is not just restricted to traffic. Interventions could focus on these general causes, for instance on the decrease of parental supervision and the prevention of heedless actions. The following observation must be made about parental supervision: parents have much greater influence on this age group than they themselves believe. Stimulating parents and providing them with strategies to protect their children without restrictricting them needlessly, is a favourable line of approach.

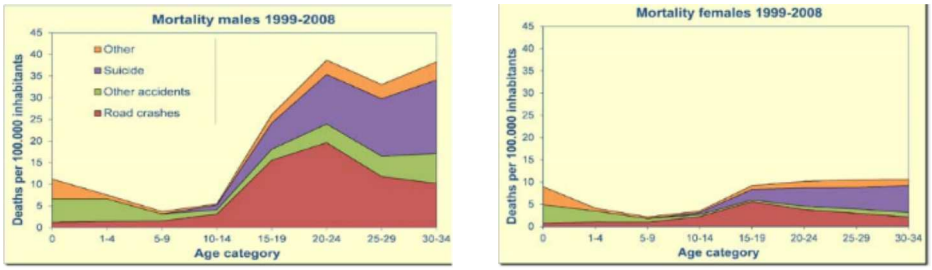

Figure 1. Unnatural death per 100.000 inhabitants by cause, age and gender during the period 1999-2008.

More about the traffic behaviour of adolescents:
Risky traffic behaviour among young adolescents (SWOV fact sheet)
Young drivers and their young passengers (SWOV fact sheet)
Young novice drivers (SWOV facsheet)