Teen driving as public drama: statistics, risk, and the social construction of youth as a public problem

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In popular and policy framings in the USA, traffic accidents and fatalities involving teens are typically treated as having their own facticity. Much like other social phenomenon, teen driving accidents are regarded as though they are part of an objective reality external to a set of ideational or discursive processes and social organization of knowledge. Treated as such, teen driving accidents and fatalities are uncritically classified, counted, and compared with rates of accidents and fatalities among other groups of drivers with the purpose to direct public policy decisions and give authority to specific legislative agendas. Examining the rhetorical practices through which an event or an object appears as a factual given, ‘as if’ belonging to an objective and unproblematic reality, this paper examines how teen driving and the teen driver are social created through a public problems discourse, fueling panic among parents, policy officials and legislators, educators, and risk and safety experts. Significant consideration is given to the uses and misuses of statistics about teens and driving in various media outlets and by various claims-makers in the construction of teen driving as a public drama with specific policy and legislative outcomes.

Keywords: media; risk; young adulthood; politics

Introduction

‘I’ve seen the numbers and boy, has it made a difference in teen fatalities and teen accidents. It makes a difference no matter how ridiculous it sounds,’ 17-year-old Robert tells me during one of our conversations about his learning to drive. The numbers to which he is referring are the statistics on teen driving fatalities and their alleged declines since imposing the Graduated Driver’s Licensing (GDL) law in California in 1998, a set of provisions restricting young drivers’ access to the road and intending to enhance driver safety among teen drivers. By 2006 over 40 states in the USA had adopted some version of Graduated Driver’s Licensing, motivated largely by the proliferation and repeated presentation of statistical reports reflecting ‘alarming population trends.’ ‘Fifty-four percent of teenage motor vehicle deaths in 2000 occurred on Friday, Saturday and Sunday,’ Mothers Against Drunk Driving (www.madd.org), a well-known and a highly vocal advocacy group in the public fight against drunk-driving, reports on its official website. ‘Every 16 hours a California teenager dies in a motor vehicle accident,’ one California newspaper informs its readers (Contra Costa Times 2006). ‘Nearly two of every three people killed in teen-driver crashes are people other than the teen driver,’ the American Automobile Association (2006) stated in the report entitled ‘Teen Crashes: Everyone Is at...
Risk. In the weeks following the release of this particular report, dozens of newspapers telegraphed this statistic across their pages.

In this paper, I map how statistics of this sort figure in the construction of a public problem; in this instance, the problem of the teen driver. The analysis develops from a larger multi-method study I conducted between 2000 and 2007, utilizing in-depth and focus group interviewing, multi-sited participant observation, and textual analysis. The analysis presented here relies principally on textual analysis. I work with two types of texts: first, documents produced for public consumption by organizations who are responsible for collecting, analyzing, and reporting statistics on traffic injuries and fatalities. These include statistical reports generated by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the American Automobile Association, the National Highway Traffic and Safety Association (NHTSA), and the Fatality Analysis Reporting System available through the Internet. The second type of documents I draw from are media reports, newspaper articles mostly, that use these statistical reports to construct a dramatic narrative for their audience about the place of teen drivers in American public life. My purpose is to explore the links between public problems discourse in which youth take center-stage and the collection, uses, and presentation of statistics by various claims-makers in what cultural analysts would regard as a public drama. I identify three specific types of claims-makers: the research agencies who collect these statistics for public and policy use; politicians and other public figures who use these statistics to direct and gain legitimacy for particular legislative action; and media journalists who present these statistics to frame and reframe public agendas and public concerns. I focus on the interpretive problems that arise as claim-makers present these statistics to the public, arguing that these statistics, because they carry the weight of scientific authority, are central to constructing teen driving as a significant public problem deserving swift action on the part of adults and reproducing an essentialist framework through which youth as a category of being and becoming is culturally defined. Thus, an important goal for this paper is to make visible the moral and political currents that are hidden from view by the language of ‘facts’ and appeals to scientific authority by applying a rhetorical analysis to teen driving statistics.

Attention to the (mis)uses of statistics in the framing of public problems is a well-traveled road for social constructionists whose work has aimed to detail the cultural dimensions of public consciousness, public decision-making, and resource mobilization (Kitsuse and Cicourel 1963, Gusfield 1981, Best 2001, Cohen 2002). Broadly, I situate my arguments in relation to what is often called ‘the social construction of social problems’ literature (Kitsuse and Cicourel 1963, Gusfield 1981, Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994, Best 1995, 2001, Glassner 2000) as I detail how the social phenomenon of ‘teenagers behind the wheel,’ while typically treated as a ‘fact,’ is socially created. More specifically, I borrow the analytical tools belonging to dramaturgical analysis, as I identify the key social actors and social scripts that constitute teen driving as a public drama and as cultural form, and the teenager as an essentialized category of being. I attempt to demonstrate how statistics serve as strategic ‘props’ in the performance of this public drama (Goffman 1959, 1974, Gusfield 1981). I argue that in the ‘symbolic space of communicative mobilization’ (e.g. press releases, agency reports, newspaper editorials, newspaper articles) that cultural sociologists and cultural studies scholars have recognized as central to public action and the leveraging of institutional power, statistics serve as a powerful ‘means of persuasion’ (Alexander 2006, p. 4).

Joseph Gusfield’s (1981) rhetorical unpacking of the construction of the ‘drinking-driving problem’ is particularly useful for the analysis developed here. Zerоing in on the systems of symbols through which social meanings are created and communicated,
Gusfield traces how the situation of drinking and driving came to be seen as a public problem in the USA that resulted in the fixing of public responsibility and directed public action over a period of 30 years. Gusfield is most interested in understanding the ‘fictional character of a public fact’ (1981, p. 59) and the ‘uses of knowledge as a basis for authority in public problems’ (1981, p. 6) as he unravels the ‘drinking–driving problem.’ Focusing his analysis on the rhetorical and interpretive dimensions of scientific knowledge, Gusfield reveals how a ‘factually authoritative world’ is made real as data about drinking and driving are collected, interpreted, and transmitted to the public. In the end, Gusfield finds the conceptualizations and solutions to the problem of drinking and driving by experts and officials to be wholly inadequate. ‘Locked into a consciousness of drinking-driving’ (1981, p. 6) that takes for granted the definitions of the problem, and fixes responsibility to individuals rather than to the absence of public transportation systems, officials fail to identify possible resources and alternative solutions for dealing with the phenomenon of drinking and driving. Gusfield’s critical treatment of scientific knowledge and its dissemination through various media outlets provides an opportunity to investigate how the teen driver is rhetorically created as a key actor in the larger public drama of the automobile.

I begin by introducing GDL laws. From there, I examine how youth are discursively linked with risk as they are defined through a contemporary public problems discourse, focusing a large portion of this paper on the role of statistics in constructing the public drama of the teen driver. Using several specific cases, I detail the interpretive problems created in the public presentation of these statistics. I position ‘teen driving accidents’ outside their usual realist frame, treating them instead as a cultural form in order to bring to the fore the cultural assumptions and moral bases upon which the problem of the teen driver is created. I consider alternative readings of the problem of the teen driver by examining the rhetorical practices through which an event or an object appears as a factual given, ‘as if’ belonging to an objective and unproblematic reality (Gusfield 1981), in order to imagine alternative ways to think about and address public concern about teens driving beyond GDL laws. In many ways, I regard the public drama of the teen driver as a foil for the much larger and quite unresolved public drama of the automobile. As I examine the coordinates of the public problems discourse that are deployed in the public drama of the teen driver, I demonstrate how internal attributes long associated with ‘the adolescent’ are offered up and gain hold as various claims-makers attempt to fix ‘causal responsibility’ for this public problem to teens themselves, and in the process render invisible other explanations belonging to the social world (Gusfield 1981, p. 15). One such consequence of these rhetorical moves is the sedimentation of an essentialist logic whereby social and behavioral outcomes for adolescents are treated as wholly determined by biological age and already codified ideas about adolescence as a distinct stage in the life course is reconstituted.

**Framing Graduated Driver’s Licensing laws**

In California, where much of the research for this project was conducted, GDL was first proposed in 1997 by Republican State Senator Tim Leslie, who authored The Brady/Jared Teen Driver Safety Act – so named after two teen drivers Brady Grasinger and Jared Cunningham who died in separate accidents in Southern California. The California GDL law, sponsored by the American Automobile Association, requires all drivers under 18 to hold an instructional permit for six months instead of the 30 days required for adults before securing a provisional license. Teens must complete 50 hours of adult-supervised
driving, in addition to completing a driver’s education course. Teen drivers may not carry passengers under the age of 20 unless supervised by a licensed driver aged 25 or older for the first six months (except in situations of family need), nor drive between 11:00 p.m. and 5:00 a.m. until turning 18, unless accompanied by a licensed driver who is at least 25 years old. Exceptions to this provision are granted for work, school, family and medical situations. The GDL mimics what are called status laws – laws imposed on youth and children but not adults – and are classified as secondary violations, which means teen drivers will not be stopped solely because they are suspected violators.

Although nearly all states have adopted some version of the GDL law since 1996, the laws vary considerably across states. GDL laws are generally organized in stages; full driving privileges are granted once the driver has successfully passed through or satisfied each of the steps. The logic of GDL corresponds to developmental ideas of growth and change as naturally occurring in stages – as one assumes that driving improves with age. The idea of change occurring in discrete stages is arguably a legacy of developmental theorists, most notably Jean Piaget, and continues to direct popular thinking and policy about teens. GDL laws and the restrictions falling under GDL provisions are age specific. In Florida, for example, seat-belt violations are considered primary offenses for drivers under the age of 18 but secondary offenses for drivers over the age of 18, irrespective of years driven. Eight states prohibit cell-phone use while driving for drivers under 20, and 43 states have imposed night-time driving restrictions for their young drivers but not for other new drivers.

Such provisioning is steeped in ideas about cognitive development as linear, unidirectional, and cumulative. This is evidenced by the fact that age alone, not years driving or familiarity with basic traffic laws or traffic safety, determines whether a driver will be required to adhere to the law. The licensing of drivers is organized under the banner of ‘experience eliminates error.’ The problem, however, is that age alone is presumed to determine experience.

In this sense, GDL laws, in addition to expressing long-held ideas about teens, also reflect an emerging logic about the nature of risk. As Frank Furedi, author of Culture of Fear, insightfully remarked: ‘to be at risk is no longer about what you do but who you are’ (Furedi 2002, p. 19). Furedi suggests the risk categories that have gained solid footing in American society are less likely to be categories based in action and increasingly categories based on group membership. It is to a consideration of youth as a risk category that I now turn.

Risky business: youth as risk construction and the public drama of the car

Concerns about youth and risk on the road reflect the liminal and precarious status of teens in American culture today. We fear them as much as we fear for them. The idea of youth as ‘at risk’ or alternately as the source of risk is well ensconced in the American cultural imagination. A preoccupation with youth and risk express the social worries of a nation who feels it is slowly losing its grip of control over its youth, as adults and teens spend an increasing amount of time in largely separate spheres as the processes of cultural change reshape the social institutions of family and work. Many youth scholars have noted that youth are coming of age in a moment of deep insecurity felt by adults in what many regard as a culture without trust and social cohesion, absent of a sense of certainty and predictability but besieged by anxiety and insecurity (Giddens 1991, Furedi 2002, Beck 1998, Cieslik and Pollock 2002, Cohen 2002), where ‘parents feel ineffective and families
are seen as dysfunctional’ (Fine et al. 2001, p. 310). Thus, the concern directed to teens as they take to the road reflects a current that has pulled them along but originates elsewhere.

Much has been written about risk in modern society and the social construction of risk categories in recent years as the USA has become an increasingly risk adverse society. Anthony Giddens (1991) and Urlich Beck (1992) have both characterized the current period of late modernity in terms of risk, arguing that as social institutions such as family and work are reorganized, the boundaries of civil society remapped along new coordinates, and broader processes of cultural change corresponding to the needs of a thoroughly global economy, a festering uncertainty about social membership and identity proliferate. For both Beck and Giddens, risk is central to the organization of the social world. Indeed, a great many of our most commanding public dramas cohere around the avoidance of risk. While many have remarked that actual risks to us (especially in terms of health) have declined, the perception is one of ever-escalating risk (Douglas 1992). Frank Furedi (2002) argues that concern for risk reflects a shift in our collective thinking defined by the emergence of ‘a risk consciousness,’ where a ‘precautionary principle’ and a ‘doctrine of limits’ prevail, where caution is institutionalized and safety experts weigh in on everything as they attempt to predict and prevent what Furedi calls the big ‘A’ accidents. Furedi notes that risk, once cast in positive terms as in ‘one is willing to take risks,’ is now defined as a negative. As a risk-adverse culture, we are increasingly engaged in risk assessment, risk avoidance, risk analysis, and risk management.4 Central to new methods of governance and management (Cohen 2002), risk has become big business, an ever-expanding and diversifying industry (Douglas 1992).

Stanley Cohen argues that ‘perceptions of heightened risk evoke images of panic’ that often result in ‘deviancy amplification’ and the allocation of blame (2002, p. xxvi). Distortion and exaggeration follow, with media attention shifting away from the original risk event toward its likelihood for recurrence. This is well illustrated by the very grand and gripping front-page headline of a 2007 Washington Post story entitled ‘When Is It Going to Stop?’, which detailed the circumstances of a single car crash that resulted in the death of three teenage women. Central to this process is what Cohen refers to as symbolization whereby an object, image or set of terms are separated from any previously neutral connotation and are recast negatively. Eventually these symbols become self-referential with their own descriptive and explanatory potential (Cohen 2002, p. 28).

In the case of concern relating to the automobile, the teen driver bears the burden of being discursively linked with ‘risk on the road.’ ‘The teen driver’ stripped of its neutral connotation is recast as a symbol of danger and peril. Through symbolization the teen driver becomes the principal source of risk. It is in this specific way that teens are central figures in the larger public drama of the automobile. Consider, for example, a lengthy 2004 Washington Post article detailing the tragic loss of several teenagers involved in automobile accidents in the DC Metropolitan area. In the article, the terms ‘teenager’ and ‘teen’ were invoked 23 times. This article was one of a number of articles that appeared in fall 2004 on the topic that galvanized community members to public action. A series of public town hall meetings across Northern Virginia counties were held in the months following to address what was now seen as an urgent and growing public problem. Less than two years later, state legislation was passed in Virginia barring the use of cell phones for teen drivers.

The symbolization of ‘the teen driver’ as risk category is also demonstrated in an electronic search using Lexis-Nexis I conducted between April 2004 and October 2004 using the term ‘teen driver’. Of the first 125 entries, five dealt with topics other than safety and risk. The remaining 120 addressed teens, concern for safety, and their likelihood of being involved in traffic accidents and fatalities. Yet in another electronic search using the
word ‘driver,’ only 21 out of the first 50 focused on accidents and safety; notably, 11 out of the 21 were actual local accident reports. What might be gathered from these examples is that when teens and driving are paired together, which they are with considerable regularity, it is almost always in terms of concern for risk and safety. The attention to risk on the road and teens reflects a broader pattern of discursively linking youth with risk. Indeed, the idea of ‘at-risk’ teens is deeply entrenched in the minds of the American public and directs much of US educational and health policy and discourse, as many youth scholars have shown.

In the framing of this public drama, American teens are narrowly placed into one of two opposing risk categories: first, as a should-be-protected class to be kept safe from risk, danger, and harm associated with the road. Here they are cast as victims, passive actors in need of adult protection. David Altheide (2002) has argued that children are powerful symbols in discourses of fear, strategically used to achieve desired ends. One such consequence of this risk construction is that adults worry endlessly about what appears to be boundless risks to children at school, at home, and on the road. Much of this anxiety is exploited by media to boost television ratings that translate into excessive and often unwarranted worry for parents, financial gain for media corporations, and rating boosts for local and state political figures in public polling. Many fears about young Americans – teen pregnancy, teen gambling, teen violence, teen drinking, and child abduction – are social constructed public dramas, having little basis in reality (Glassner 2000). Nevertheless, the American public is often left with the impression that the risks young people face today are countless and far more serious than generations past and that we must act swiftly if we are to ward off and avert the many dangers that lie await in their path.

Yet, just as teens are framed as needing our protection, teens are just as likely to be cast as the very risk to be contained. In both media reports and political discourse, teens are signifiers for risk. Here they are defined as the cause of the problem, threats to the social or moral order (Cahill 1990, Giroux 1996, Males 1999, Cohen 2002). Within this frame, the social order of the road is marked by equilibrium with teen drivers as the menace to be contained. As Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1992) has persuasively argued, risk constructions of this sort serve as a way to categorize social membership, preserve the moral boundaries drawn by powerful groups, and maintain social order.

It is because of these opposing risk constructions that, when it comes to the road, American teens are seen as requiring protection from themselves more than anything else. It is their inexperience, ‘immaturity,’ ‘thrill-seeking behavior,’ and sense of invulnerability that is to blame. An essentialist logic that reduces teens to an indistinguishable mass whose behavior is biologically determined prevails. A compelling example of this point can be found in recent media attention in the USA given to the idea of the adolescent brain and its links to risky behavior more generally. Consider a 2005 article from the Washington Post entitled ‘Brain Immaturity Could Explain Teen Crash Rates.’ The article begins:

By most physical measures, teenagers should be the world’s best drivers. Their muscles are supple, their reflexes quick, their senses at a lifetime peak. Yet car crashes kill more of them than any other cause-a problem some researchers believe, that is rooted in the adolescent brain. (Washington Post, 1 February 2005, p. A10, col. 3)

Reflecting a broad and deepening cultural investment in biomedical models to explain human behavior and complex social problems and to provide evidentiary support for specific policy actions, this particular article details some of the recent research in brain imagining – and in doing so serves to cement the impression that the causal connection between brain development and risky behavior is a well-established fact among members of
the scientific community, even if consensus has yet to be reached. This is revealed upon a closer reading of the article. The staff writer notes that scientists have yet to prove any causal links let alone verifiable correlations between brain changes and behavior. However, this point is buried within a fleeting sentence in the ninth paragraph of the article located on the second page of the story. No doubt this point was overshadowed for readers by the declaration in bold print ‘Brain Immaturity, Risk-Taking Linked’ offered on the same page. Since a cursory read of the article is most likely, readers will probably be able to recall the statements ‘Growth Takes Longer Than Presumed’ and ‘A Period of Recklessness’ first, since both were capitalized and in bold. It is worth remarking here that recent findings from brain imaging research, however inconclusive, were used in support of the Virginia bill to restrict cell phone use for teens while driving discussed earlier.

The symbolization of the teen driver as public problem and the repeated invocation of ‘youth and risk’ reflect a set of moral and political choices and cultural assumptions about who is responsible for disruptions to the social order of the road and why. In this public drama, teens are seen as key social actors, but they are without social agency since their biology is presumed to overwhelm them. As illustrated by the case of the Virginia bill, and GDL laws more generally, these assumptions and choices direct social and political action. Resolving the problem of the teen driver is presumed to restore order to the road.

### Media, statistics, and the public drama of teen driving

As a public drama, the teen driver has held a fairly steady course since the passage of the first GDL laws over a decade ago. Its unfolding has been cyclical, gaining momentum, quieting down, only to be re-ignited as flames are fanned by media reporters who serve as not only the key ‘gatekeepers of problems discourse’ (Fine 2006, p. 6) but also the arbiters of risk since they actively shape our perception of where we as a society and where our members might find ourselves on a risk barometer.7 Gary Alan Fine in his published presidential address for the Society for the Study of Social Problems argues:

> Once a social problem is established in the public mind as news it becomes a routine journalistic topic. Problems may be either acute or chronic, or oscillate between the two. Acute problems call for immediate action and are addressed until resolved (or until the public or editors lose interest) ... When a problem settles into a routine, the topic is shelved until something newsworthy occurs. (Fine 2006, p. 6)

While stories about the teen driver are regular features of story line-ups, the specific newsworthy event that recently propelled the teen driver under the spotlight, what Stanley Cohen (2002) regards as ‘amplification,’ was the highly public release of a report on teens and driving by the American Automobile Association in spring 2006. The language in the report was alarming, carrying a tone of gravity and blame. Consider for instance the following passage: ‘The tragedy of teen-driver crashes goes well beyond the teen drivers and their teen passengers. These crashes also kill pedestrians and people in other vehicles—husbands, mothers, children, brothers and grandmothers’ (American Automobile Association 2006, p. 8). In the weeks following its release, this report grabbed headlines. In a CCN report, one news-reporter ‘explores a threat many young drivers don’t think about — the danger you pose to others,’ while one newspaper story headline read ‘Young drivers can be a road hazard to us all’ as it went on to report ‘15 to 17 year old drivers who crash are killing more than themselves.’

Statistics stand at the center of the public drama of the ‘teen driver,’ symbolically invoked by the claims-makers – what Howard Becker (1963) once termed the ‘moral
entrepreneurs’ of a public problem. In the course of this research I was surprised by the swathe of numbers, alarming numbers intended to incite fear and concern, and ultimately serving as a call to action. The windfall of statistics on teens and driving has served to elevate teen traffic fatalities to the level of significant risk and to define it as a serious public problem, carrying far more importance than countless other problems in the public drama of the automobile.

Joel Best argues in his book *Damned Lies and Statistics* that:

We tend to regard statistics as though they are magical, as though they are more than mere numbers. We treat them as powerful representations of the truth; we act as though they distill the complexity and confusion of reality into simple facts. We use statistics to convert complicated social problems into more easily understood estimates, percentages and rates. Statistics direct our concern; they show us what we ought to worry about and how much we ought to worry. (Best 2001, p. 160)

And worry we do when it comes to teens on the road. But perhaps we worry, as Barry Glassner cogently argued in his book *The Culture of Fear*, about the wrong things. Questions of ‘disproportionality’ present in Stanley Cohen’s model of moral panics are central here. That is, is the societal reaction proportionate to the seriousness or pervasiveness of the source of concern? In what remains of this paper, I aim to demonstrate that, in the public drama of the teen driver, significant discrepancy exists between the attention teen drivers ought to receive and the attention teen drivers do receive.

Nearly 19 million adult drivers were involved in car accidents in 2002 but were largely overlooked in national discussions about driving and risk. Yet the nearly 2.5 million youth involved in car accidents in 2002 found themselves at the center of national debates about driving and risk. Likewise the 214,300 25–54-year-old drivers involved in fatal car accidents received little national attention (based on their belonging to a specific age group or any other status group), but not the 6100 15–20 year olds. According to the Department of Transportation’s NHTSA, 3657 drivers between the ages of 15 and 20 died in traffic accidents in 2003. Yet they received far more, if not virtually all, of the media attention in the allocation of blame, while the nearly 40,000 others who also died in automobile accidents the same year faded into the background as the American public locked its gaze onto the category of teens.

Media reports play a significant role in shaping our perception about teens and driving since they are the conduits through which accident counts compiled by agencies like the NHTSA, the Insurance Institute, and the American Automobile Association are presented to the public. The media’s presentation of statistical data, which are critical to campaigns to fix responsibility, generate significant misperception, thereby amplifying our concern. Consider this example: ‘Spate of teen driving deaths provokes calls for change,’ one recent *Washington Post* headline reads (24 October 2004, pp. A1, A14). The article reports:

in just one month’s time, 15 young people have been killed in the Washington region . . . In the wake of the wrecks, legislators, law enforcement officials, advocacy groups, and parents have been searching for ways to prevent teenage traffic deaths including calls for stricter laws, more stringent licensing, driver-education programs and more parental involvement. (*Washington Post*, 24 October 2004, p. A14)

The article details the nine accidents in which 15 young people were killed, also noting a string of violations that the teenage drivers had committed: driving after curfew, driving with excessive speed, failing to wear seat belts, driving while drunk, reckless driving, and
carrying more passengers than allowed under the recent GDL law for teen drivers. The story, which includes pictures of 11 of the young people whose lives were lost, is sobering and grim; one is left with perhaps more questions than answers. ‘As dreams die young, answers are elusive,’ the reporter opines.

This article ran on the heels of another, featured a week earlier, also in the Washington Post, written by the same staff writer. Its headline declared ‘Teen Auto Fatalities Rise 5% in the U.S.: Studies Cite Speed, Alcohol as Factors.’ The article went on to report, ‘the number of people between 15–20 years old involved in fatal crashes rose 5% between 1993 and 2003’ (Washington Post, Kunkle, p. B1). Yet, the article does not reveal that the total number of drivers involved in fatal crashes also increased during that same period (see Table 1). Young drivers between 15 and 20 years old account for eight percent of the total increase. The article also fails to report that while there was an increase in the actual number of traffic fatalities among teens, the number of licensed teen drivers also rose by seven percent. In 1992, almost 11.7 million licensed drivers were young drivers. In 2002, 12.5 million drivers in the USA were between the ages of 15 and 20 (see note 9). Young drivers represent a smaller percentage of the total number of fatal crashes – down from 14% in 1993 to 13.6% in 2003. Rates of fatal motor vehicle crashes for teens has also declined, by 42% for young men and by 17% for young women between 1980 and 2002 according to a 2005 data brief by Child Trends. The ever-increasing statistics regarding teen auto collision and driving fatalities, as one May 2004 article claimed, appears to overstate the warrant for action. An equivalent might be if the media, as justification for a particular policy change, reported that the number of teen automobile fatalities in Washington, DC doubled in one year’s time, which in fact it did – from two teen fatalities to four. Claiming that accidents doubled is compelling, probably enough to generate public concern, but when actual numbers this low are also figured in, the warrant for action is weakened.

The first of the two Washington Post articles also mentioned the five percent increase in traffic deaths for teens, noting ‘traffic deaths of teenagers are rising nationwide, up 5 percent in the past ten years, even as the overall fatality rate for such crashes has dropped.’ As some readers may have already noticed, the problem with this statement is that it is comparing apples and oranges – ‘actual numbers’ of teen deaths are compared against ‘rates’ of traffic fatalities overall. The statistical rule of comparing numbers with numbers, rates with rates is cast aside as these articles serve to set agendas (even if inadvertently), shape public opinion, and tell a compelling story in order to sustain their readership. This point becomes clear upon a closer reading of the specifics of the article. Among the 15

Table 1. Involvement of drivers 15–20 years old in fatal crashes, 1993 and 2003.

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<td>Age</td>
<td>Total, 1993</td>
<td>Age, 15–20</td>
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<td>53,401</td>
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<td>Male</td>
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<td>Female</td>
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young people whose lives were lost covered in this story was a 22-year-old young man and a three-year-old girl, hardly teens. Curiously, little is made of the fact that the three-year-old girl who died while traveling with her father, was only wearing a passive shoulder restraint while sitting in the front seat, which is illegal in Virginia where the accident occurred, as it is in many other states, and she was not restrained in a booster seat. (Children under the age of five years must be in a child safety seat in the back seat according to a Virginia law passed in 2002.) Here is a clear case of adult error, lost in the scramble to conflate risk on the road with the teen driver.

‘Traffic accidents remain the leading cause of deaths among teenagers,’ the article also reports.11 This article is not the first to mention this fact. This claim is repeatedly invoked by interest and advocacy groups such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving calling for stricter policies for young drivers, and countless media reports. Motor vehicle crashes are, in fact, the leading cause of death among 15–20 year olds. But they are also the leading cause of death for 13 and 14 year olds, a group ineligible to drive. These media reports fail to note that teens in the United States, unlike their older counterparts, die from few other things. Improvements in childhood medicine combined with national immunization campaigns have reduced the number of deaths among children from childhood illnesses. Mortality rates for children in all age groups in the USA have declined since the early 1980s. (Other than a slight increase in adolescent mortality in the late 1980s.) Adolescents in the USA are less likely to die today than they were 25 years ago. Significantly of all children, adolescent mortality is not even the highest. According to Child Trends’ online databank, children are far more likely to die during their first year than at any other time during childhood. Mortality rates for males between 15 and 19 years old are 95 per 100,000, but 800 per 100,000 for males under the age of one.12 For Black infants the number is even higher, with a mortality rate of 1506 per 100,000, whereas traffic fatalities among 15–20 year olds occurs at a rate of 66 per 100,000.

‘We think of statistics as facts that we discover, not as numbers we create,’ Joel Best argues (2001, p. 160). ‘Counting and ‘categorizing’ is assumed to exist apart from the interpretation of them. Statistics become what media scholar Neil Postman (1985) calls ‘decontextualized facts’; they mean very little outside the context in which they are used. Statistics typically appear through the support of organizations and funding, often created to set a particular agenda or to raise public awareness. In many instances, the original context in which they were created and their links to other numbers are lost as they are passed along a chain of reports so that one journalist from The Washington Post can cite a five percent rise in teen fatalities without understanding this rise in relation to other numbers. As Stanley Cohen (2002, p. 28) has argued, in the process of symbolization, sets of terms, events or objects as they are recast in support of a moral campaign eventually become self-referential, carrying their own descriptive and explanatory potential. Such is the case here. Yet the moral and political currents that trump a more reasoned assessment of these numbers remain hidden from view. In the end, assumptions stand in for explanations, as a disproportional level of attention given continues unabated.

Ambiguous numbers: causation, association and other measurement woes

Part of the problem with how the public has come to understand teens and risk on the road stems from the way the numbers are classified and counted by record-keeping agencies themselves such as the NHTSA. Joseph Gusfield remarks in The Culture of Public Problems: Drinking-Driving and the Symbolic Order that ‘The factual world’ of which statistics are a part ‘appears as unproblematic, certain and devoid of ambiguity’
Certainty, clarity, facticity, authority (Gusfield 1981, p. 55) are central to campaigns of legitimacy for a given public problem because they help to transmit a sense of significance and urgency to the public, Gusfield argues. Yet the language in these statistical reports produced by these agencies is often frustratingly ambiguous. An excellent case in point is the way alcohol-related traffic fatalities and accidents are measured in the USA. A motor vehicle crash is defined as ‘alcohol related’ if at least one driver or non-occupant (pedestrian or bicyclist) in the accident is found to have a BAC above 0.01 gram per deciliter. Permit me to explain what this means with an example. If a 17-year-old girl who is driving home at 10:00 p.m. from her shift at Safe Rides (a national program, staffed by other teens to provide teens who drink with safe rides home) is suddenly rear-ended at a stop light by a 45-year-old mother on her way home from a PTA meeting and then propelled onto the sidewalk, hitting a 30-year-old man waiting in line to gain entry into a nightclub who has a BAC above 0.01 gram per deciliter, this will be counted as an alcohol-related accident involving a teen. Yet clearly the teen was neither drunk nor to blame. The absurdity of this scenario or any number of possible others is itself revealing.

The National Center for Statistics and Analysis may note that the term ‘alcohol-related’ does not mean a crash caused by the presence of alcohol, but this is rarely noted in media reports documenting teens’ involvement in alcohol related-accidents. I recorded countless instances of this sort of slippage. Recall if you will the first Washington Post article, which noted ‘Alcohol was a factor in one [accident] and was suspected in another’ (24 October 2004, p. A14). Seventy-six percent of young drivers involved in fatal crashes involving alcohol in 2003 had a BAC of 0.00 according to the NHTSA. What this means is that 76% of teen drivers involved in alcohol-related fatal crashes were not drunk themselves nor did they even have enough alcohol in their system to register when their blood-alcohol levels were measured (see Table 3). Yet, zero tolerance laws in the USA are especially punitive for young drivers.

The language used in these accident reports also leaves one guessing about causation. Who caused the accident? Who is responsible? This is rarely counted. What are counted are relationships where the causal direction remains unclear. Yet as Joseph Gusfield (1981), p. 74) argues ‘association is converted into causation’ as data move beyond a community of scientists and into the public sphere. This is frequently the case in the public drama of teen driving. Tables will document ‘Accidents involving teens,’ ‘Accident involving teen drivers,’ ‘Teen drivers involved in fatal crashes,’ or ‘Teen driver fatalities,’ never making clear where fault lies. This becomes a dangerous word play. In a context where a discursive link

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<tr>
<td>2003 population (%)</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>5.7</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>14.</td>
<td>9.6</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>9.0</td>
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<td>Drivers involved in 2003 fatal crashes (%)</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>19.6</td>
<td>19.2</td>
<td>15.7</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>8.4</td>
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<td>2002 licensed drivers (%)</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>19.3</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>10.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drivers involved in 2002 fatal crashes per 100,000 licensed drivers</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>47.4</td>
<td>31.7</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>22.8</td>
<td>20.3</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>23.8</td>
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Note: a2003 data not available.
between traffic accidents and fatalities and teens is already well established, the assumption of cause inevitably will be pinned to teens. Media reporting plays a heavy hand in this. For example, most media reports collapse ‘accidents involving teen drivers’ and ‘accidents involving teens as passengers’ into one category, giving the appearance of a much higher number of accidents where teens were behind the wheel. As media report accident statistics, the assumption is that an accident involving a teen must have been an accident caused by a teen. Few media reports attend to those particulars of causation. In fact, it is rarely specified in media reports if the teens involved in the accident reported were being driven by another teen or by an adult. This is because media reports are involved in agenda setting and claims-making, what Jeffrey Alexander (2006, p. 4) has called ‘communicative mobilization’.

Contextual information is also rarely provided. For example, one reason why teens are more likely to be involved in traffic accidents is because teens are more likely to travel in cars that carry other teens than are adults. Because most adults in the USA who own their own cars spend the majority of their time in cars either running errands or commuting to work, time spent in their car is usually spent alone (Kay 1997). Accidents involving teen drivers result in a higher number of injuries to teens in part because teenagers regularly transport other teenage passengers in their cars. According to one report from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 47% of teens between the ages of 13 and 19 who died in vehicle crashes were passengers (Williams 2001, p. 1). Rather than acknowledging this point as at least partly significant, moral entrepreneurs and other claims-makers instead rush to explain the disproportionate number of teens in accidents relative to licensed teen drivers by examining what is wrong with teens. In our search for answers, we rely on essentialist ideas about adolescents and recycled stereotypes of the ‘reckless, capricious teen,’ identifying a chain of damning internal attributes; first among the list is ‘immaturity’ as the cause for accidents that in a number of cases youth themselves did not in fact cause. Consider the remark from a California Highway Patrolman quoted in a 2006 newspaper article: ‘The problem with young drivers is not only inexperience, they have no concept of death’ (www.News.yahoo.com, 2 May 2006).

Age is actually far less powerful a predictor of the likelihood of involvement in traffic accidents than is sex. Sex is more likely to predict a driver’s likelihood of having an accident. In 1993, men represented 39,556 of the 53,401 drivers involved in fatal crashes. Young women represented 1971 of the 53,401 drivers involved in fatal crashes in 1993. They were 3.6% of all drivers involved in fatal crashes. In 2003 that number had increased slightly to four percent. Yet young women because they are also ‘teens’ are routinely charged with being drivers who are ‘at risk’. These numbers are also revealing when compared with young men who represent a much larger percentage of drivers in fatal crashes than young women, although the number of young men involved as drivers in fatal crashes declined from 1993 to 2003 (all men declined by two percent as drivers). In 1993, young men represented 10% of all drivers involved in fatal crashes. In 2003, young men represented 9.5% of all drivers involved in fatal crashes, a significantly higher number of crashes than their female counterparts (see Table 1). This variance has been overlooked in media reports in the allocation of blame to ‘teen drivers,’ yet deserves consideration since it is men as a group, not teens as a group, who are involved in the majority of fatal crashes.

In the several electronic searches I conducted, I came across no news story addressing this point, other than one that mentioned the point in passing but provided no sustained examination of it. Given that young women between the ages of 16 and 20 represent such a small number of total drivers involved in fatal accidents relative to young men of a similar age, despite their being only slightly less likely to hold a driver’s license (73%) than their
male counterparts (74%), we should rethink the use of ‘teen’ as an umbrella category and disaggregate these age categories in statistical research since greater differences appear to exist within this age group than the differences that exist when comparing them with other age groups.16

Sociologist Mike Males – who analyzed police reports on 101,000 California drivers involved in the 38,000 fatal traffic accidents from 1995 to 2004 collected by the Fatality Analysis Reporting Systems – has identified poverty, income, and miles driven as the most salient variables in explaining the statistical gap in fatal accidents between mature adults (aged 45–54) and young drivers (aged 15–19).17 Age, Males argues, is not statistically significant. When poverty rates and miles driven are held constant for these two groups of drivers, the risk gap is 1.3 to 1 (see note 17). Drawing from National Household Travel Survey and Fatality Analysis Reporting System data, Males asserts that ‘the average teen driver suffers one fatal crash per 15 million miles driven.’ This, Males notes, ‘is equivalent to one more accident than for a middle-aged adult having driven the same number of miles.’ Males also points out that teens in more affluent counties, because they are far more likely to drive than teens in poorer counties, are less likely to be involved in accidents both in terms of actual miles driven and absolute terms. ‘Where teens drive a lot they quickly gain the experience to become safe drivers – as safe as adults under similar conditions,’ Males concludes.

Concern for teen drivers and their limited experience relative to some older drivers who have spent years driving may deserve some attention, but does not seem to warrant the amount and types of attention it has received in the larger public drama of the American automobile. Cars themselves are dangerous. American car dependence arising from community planning, and the lack of government interest in making public transportation a viable alternative to the car, should be of concern. But instead teens become the focus of concern when different public groups and organizational experts examine accidents on the road. Anthropologist Mary Douglas in her book Risk and Blame: Essays in Cultural Theory makes the argument that risk analysis suffers from what Sociologist Max Weber once called ‘methodological individualism.’ By this she means that the unit of analysis in risk analysis is the individual. Risk analysis rarely attempts to assess larger institutions and their role in creating risk because of difficulties in measurement. ‘To start from the individual and stay with the individual to the bitter end, this is their chosen escape route to objectivity,’ Douglas has argued (1992, p. 11). The consequence of this is a focus toward internal factors (i.e. immaturity, carelessness), over external factors (i.e. traffic density, age of automobile, time of day while driving), in attempting to assess risk. In the public drama of teens and the automobile, claims-makers atomize risk, locating it within the individual rather than examining risk as an expression of patterns of collective action, institutional

Table 3. Alcohol involvement among drivers 15–20 years old involved in fatal crashes, 2003.

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<tr>
<th>Driver status</th>
<th>Number of drivers</th>
<th>0.00 g/dl</th>
<th>0.01–0.07 g/dl</th>
<th>0.08 g/dl or higher</th>
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<tr>
<td>Surviving</td>
<td>4227</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fatally injured</td>
<td>3657</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>7884</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19</td>
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decision-making, or other social forces. Joseph Gusfield in his discussion of causal attribution and individual responsibility makes a similar point, arguing: ‘The designation of driver performance as the major “cause” of auto accidents has been a persistent facet of the public discussion of automobile safety in the United States’ (1981, p. 43). Indeed, this is a feature of the narrative structure of public problems discourse in general.

Statistics, youth as a risk construction and social control

‘Don’t be a statistic’ is a turn of phrase commonly deployed in public campaigns that attempt to redirect the actions of teens and/or admonish their behavior. Yet ironically or glibly invoked, as it often is by teenagers themselves, it reveals how an increasingly diverse group can be discursively reduced to an indistinguishable mass whose reality can be easily distilled through a collection of numbers. In this paper I have drawn attention to the way the teen driver is constructed as a public drama involving various claims-makers. I have focused on the social uses of accident-related statistics in the creation of this public drama and the essentialist frames that are deployed at several stages in the process of constructing and disseminating knowledge about risk on the road.

Media and research agencies treat teen driving as a ‘fact’ as though it just exists waiting to be counted and, in doing so, elide how the teen driver is created (Kitsuse and Cicourel 1963, Gusfield 1981, Best 1995, 2001). Alternately, this paper has attempted to map the rhetorical means by which the teen driver is created ‘as if’ belonging to a factual world alone. Social constructivists demonstrated long ago how language is itself a site where reality is as much created as it is expressed (Berger and Luckman 1966, Emerson 1970, Smith 1990a,b, 1999, Miron and Inda 2000). Language, in its ordinary and situated uses, performs or produces the very actions or subjects it claims to simply describe. A series of claims, while purportedly revealing some kind of truth about teens and driving risk, performs an action. That is, it serves to define youth as distinguishable from its counterpart – the adult. Statistics are especially effective in this regard because they carry the weight of scientific legitimacy and authority. Analyzing statistics for their rhetorical value provides opportunity to demonstrate how moral and political decisions and cultural assumptions about social groups guide us as we move between a scientific realm and a public realm where problems are conceived, dramas are scripted, actors are cast, direction is given, and action is taken.

Sociologist Dorothy Smith (1990a,b, 1999) regards statistical productions as ‘textual realities’ – objectified bodies of knowledge divorced from the actual local ordering of the everyday worlds, where data stand in for the actualities they intend to represent. For Smith, these textual practices coordinated among different organizational levels are central to an apparatus of ruling and a hierarchical ordering of the social world. Scientific knowledge, because of the primacy it is given in various institutional affairs, frames our understanding of populations and assists in the coordination, regulation, and control of those populations (Foucault 1980, Lesko 2001, Smith 1987, 1999). Building on the theoretical program of Michel Foucault, Nancy Lesko (2001, p. 43) has argued that the collection and quantification of statistics that is fundamental to the very project of science itself, is central to ‘the concept of a calculated, knowable population’ – and thus is critical to the governance and regulation of those populations. In this sense, these statistics as they are taken up, used, and abstracted from the contexts in which they are produced also are productive, in that they form and shape youth into a distinct and recognizable group. We are repeatedly presented with reified constructions of youth such that youth are interchangeable, one hardly distinguishable from another. Thus, just as statistics limit
and restrict the group of which the numbers are principally about, they also construct this
group into a particular image, in this instance the signifier of ‘risk’ – risk to others and risk
to themselves. Youth come into being as a bounded social and political category, as a risk
category through these discursive practices.

One might think of statistics on traffic fatalities and injury then as part of a complex of
representations that organize a particular set of social relations with youth. Arising from a
rationalized system to administer and govern an ever-increasingly diverse population, the
collection of statistics assist in the regulation of youth, serving to justify a series of
restrictions that limits young people’s ability to move in and around a range of public
settings: from schools to roadways to public parks and an endless number of commercial
settings as well. The GDL laws provide one example. Scholars of the sociology of official
statistics have long recognized that statistical systems ‘serve an interest in social
coordination and control’ (Alonso and Starr 1987, p. 9). One important consequence of
this control is that it limits youth in their ability to be more active participants in the public
realm in matters of concern to them. GDL laws appear to foreclose youths’ access to the
public realm in a very tangible way – especially given the absence of alternative means of
public transportation in the USA, unlike other (post)industrialized nations that boast far
more comprehensive public transit systems and where the teen driver is probably less likely
to galvanize mass worry. The GDL’s manifest design may be to ease new drivers to the
road, but its latent function is to serve as a regulatory strategy governing young people’s
access to and activities within the public sphere. Indeed, critics of the GDL laws, noting the
national decline among 16 year olds seeking a license since 1991, have pointed out that
GDL laws have simply been most successful in reducing the number of actual teen drivers
on the road. Actual declines in auto accidents and fatalities among teens resulting from
GDL laws might be an instance of what Robert Merton once identified as ‘unanticipated
consequences of purposive social action’ having only indirectly answered its own end (cited
in Fine 2006, p. 4). Providing such narrow options for youth, they remain marginal
members of social and political life.

Conclusion: revisiting GDL laws and the moral choices behind them

Media reports regularly use numbers intended to invoke fear and panic about teens on the
road, serving to define and redefine youth in narrow ways and to dramatize the teen driver
as a social phenomenon. These media reports rely on enduring notions of ‘adolescence’
serving to fix causal responsibility for traffic accidents and fatalities on teens themselves. In
the aftermath of this public drama, unexamined assumptions become explanations –
fueling concern among our attention is diverted from more general issues about the dangers
arising from American culture’s car dependence. The strategic use of statistics has helped
fuel a growing national outpouring of concern, reminiscent as I have suggested of Stanley
Cohen’s notion of ‘moral panics.’ Goode and Ben-Yehuda (1994) have argued:

during the moral panic, the behavior of some of the members of a society is thought to be so
problematic to others ... that serious steps must be taken to control the behavior, punish the
behavior, and repair the damage ... tougher or renewed rules, more intense public hostility and
condemnation, more laws. (1994, p. 33)

Graduated drivers licensing and the call for more restrictive policies limiting teens’ access
to the public sphere have been central to managing this threat to the social order. In a
context where the rates of accidents among teens appear to have declined in the past 25
years, and rates of drinking and driving among young drivers have also declined
significantly, all of this is perplexing. We continue to dole out more restrictive policies, further limiting the ways in which young people move in and through this world, as this public drama continues to gain a larger audience.20

 Teens do die in car accidents. The rate of teens involved in fatalities, as Michael Males has demonstrated, is slightly higher than the rate of adults involved in automobile fatalities. As Cohen remarked 25 years after the publication of his first edition of *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, ‘Calling something a moral panic does not imply that this something does not exist... or the reaction is based on fantasy, hysteria, delusion or illusion or being duped by the powerful’ (2002, p. viii). But the problem is not well explained as to its cause. Perhaps something else motivates this public drama. Adolescents have long played strategic roles in national campaigns in the name of progress and change. Remarking on the emergence of the adolescent as a social and moral category of being at the beginning of the twentieth century, Lesko argues that ‘in public spectacles, scientific research, popular ideas of health and disease, and political rhetoric, adolescence became an embodiment of and worry about ‘progress’ and a site to study, diagnose and enact the modern ideas for personal and social progress’ (2001, p. 21). I have suggested in this paper that there is a moral and political basis to the choices made as claims-makers have at once responded to and been active creators of the public American drama of the teen driver, and I have done so in an effort to imagine alternate sources of culpability beyond the internal attributes thought to reside within the American adolescent. The creation of the ‘teen driver’ as a risk category expresses the anxieties and uncertainties of parents and families, policy officials, and other institutional actors at a time when the population of young folks in the USA continues to grow as aging populations recede, tipping the balance in favor of youth in total numbers and creating an impression of a youth swarm in need of reining in.21 At the same time, the demands of work for parents in an increasingly global economy have created a social situation where adolescents’ and their parents’ daily routines play out in largely separate spheres (Hochschild 1997). States continue to impose greater restrictions on young people, while reducing public funds to support them, even as their numbers grow. A look at the driving policies in the USA for teens reveals a shift in who is thought responsible for teens in the first place. Night-time curfews, the postponement of driving age, restrictions on driving hours (if observed), and expensive required driving classes all weigh heavily on American families and are among the many responsibilities parents face and the restrictive policies they confront as they raise their children in the face of a public retreat of government investment in the collective good (Bauman 2000, Harris 2004). Increasingly, the burden has fallen to the parents alone to prepare their children for the road, a public space if there ever was one. It is parents who must teach their children to be safe drivers. Of course, this assumes that parents are in fact good drivers themselves, and that they have the means and wherewithal to teach their children to drive.

 Driver’s education, a bygone standard in many publicly funded high schools, has declined because of educational budget cuts over the past decade across the USA. A smaller number of public schools today operate with the sort of budgets that enable driver’s education programs to be part of the curriculum. Instead we see an explosion of commercial schools that cost upwards of several hundred dollars to learn to drive. GDL laws are a minimal state expense relative to the mass education of new drivers, while GDL laws also seem to presuppose a middle-class family arrangement where time and money are readily available. In this sense, GDL laws might be best regarded as what Fine et al. (2001, p. 310) refer to as ‘symbolic fixes to complicated problems’ in that they direct public attention away from more significant concerns.

666

A.L. Best
Perhaps when it comes to the road we should resist talking about teens as a single group since the gulf between young women and young men as drivers is so significant. This is not to say we ought not have concern about young drivers, as we should for other drivers since cars and those who drive them have the power to end life. Nor is this to say that teens should necessarily experience the same level of autonomy or social obligation that adults have. The quick and seemingly relentless rush to invoke fear for and about teen drivers reflects a set of exaggerated claims and distortions of a more complex reality. The attention teens receive is disproportionate to the actual accidents they commit. Teens are central figures in many of the dramas of modern public life. Perhaps we ought to think a little differently not just about teens on the road but drivers, the society at large that is responsible for accidents, as we expand our roadways at a rapid pace, as traffic grows increasingly more congested, and perhaps think about a culture of cars itself as one that produces such risk. Perhaps we ought to script a new public drama, where other institutional actors, such as members of the highway lobby or high-level executives of the barreling oil oligopolies, are framed as the threat to social order.

Notes

1. An examination of the ways young people make sense of and come up against the social phenomenon of the teen driver, although significant in itself, is beyond the scope of my purposes here. The goal of this paper it to critically evaluate the role of statistics in constructing particular realities for youth to which they then must respond. Elsewhere (Best 2006) I draw on ethnographic materials to capture the complex and contradictory relationship American youth form to the automobile.

2. See Gusfield (1981) for a similar justification for the importance of such an analysis.
4. Tightening rules by University Human Subjects Review Boards provides one such example.
6. As many have noted, there is a racial dimension to these risk categories. Young men of color are framed narrowly as posing risk to others (see Giroux 1996 for instance).
7. See also Stanley Cohen (2002) for a discussion of volatility in the construction of moral panics. Cohen uses the concept of volatility to refer to the trajectory of a panic; that is, the process of its public emergence, ascendance and end.
8. Young drivers account for 6.4% of the total number of license drivers according to the NHTSA (see www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/ncsa).
10. See www.childtrendsdatabank.org.
11. According to the Center for Disease Control, in 2001 homicide was the second leading cause of death among 15–24 year olds overall (See www.saddonline.com).
13. Forty percent of teens between the ages of 16 and 19 who died in vehicle crashes were passengers. It is important note that 63% of passenger deaths for 13–19 year olds occurred when another teen was driving. Williams also points out that there is an ‘increased risk for young drivers with passengers present in studies that are based on involvement in crashes or deaths to drivers per million trips, where the influence of high vehicle occupancy on the likelihood of injury is not a factor’ (2001, p. 2) – although Williams does not specify in actual terms the increase, whether slight or sizable.
15. The NHTSA center for statistical analysis does not compare age and sex. Comparisons are made between age groups by sex.
16. The call to disaggregate units of analysis in research was argued for by feminist family researchers in the 1980s. They argued that aggregating men and women in the study of familial roles served to distort and obscure an unequal division of labor and differing role assignment in family settings based in gender. See Eichler (1988).


18. In this paper I do not mean to suggest that statistics are without value in the understanding of complex social phenomena. I attempt to provide an analysis that does not reduce all statistical systems to crude subjectivism, while also remaining loyal to the methods of inquiry belonging to a more interpretive sociology. While I analyze statistical productions in terms of their rhetorical value, I also base portions of my analysis on the authority and logic of quantitative social science, arguing that these are problems of measurement and the means by which causation and context are evaluated. Therein lies a fundamental tension. But because this paper’s purpose is to cast a critical eye on the processes through which the teen driver is socially created and reveal the taken-for-granted assumptions that have propelled the teen driver into a realm of public debate and public action, it is a tension that will have to remain for now.

19. See also Cindy Patton (2002) who explores the uses of scientific information on AIDS in Africa and its role in the formation of a neo-colonial logic that has served to re-spatialize the African continent and redefine African populations; as well as Tukufu Zuberi’s (2001) historical examination of the relationship among race, institutional racism and statistics in Thicker Than Blood: How Racial Statistics Lie.

20. Mike Davis (1990) in City of Quartz, a social history of Los Angeles, discusses youth curfews; for example, drawing attention to the racial bias in the enforcement of curfews. Curfews tend to be heavily enforced in communities of color, especially in poor urban areas, but not in largely white communities, especially in higher income, suburban areas.

21. It is worth noting that there is racial component to this demographic shift, in that the growing numbers of youth are much more racially diverse than their older counterparts.

References