



## Tougher Driving Laws in Texas – Especially for Teens

Written On August 31, 2009 By [Bob Kraft](#)

Tomorrow, September 1, 2009, is the day quite a few new laws go into effect in Texas. Several of these laws will directly apply to vehicle drivers and passengers, and all Texans should be aware of them. The goal of each of these new laws is to increase safety on our roads and highways, and to decrease the number of car wrecks and serious injuries. Here is a brief summary of a few of the most important vehicle laws as excerpted from the [Dallas Morning News](#):

Buckle your seat belts – it could be a bumpy Tuesday as new driving laws go into effect that will toughen the rules of the road, especially for teenagers.

Foremost, you will need to climb into the back and pull those buckles out from between the seat cushions. For the first time in Texas, all passengers will be required to wear a seat belt – not just those in the front seat or younger than 15.

While you're back there, secure a car seat for any child younger than 8. Currently, only children 4 and younger have to be in a safety seat.

And if you want to talk about these changes, don't do it on a hand-held cellphone in an active school zone. As of Tuesday, cellphones in school zones will be banned statewide.

State lawmakers have been loath to mess with Texans and intrude on the inner-sanctum of their autos. Texas was one of the last states to pass safety belt requirements – waiting until 1985 – or an open-container law – not until 2001.

The Legislature's reluctance to go further, especially to prevent drunken driving, is lamentable because those proposals could have saved even more lives, said Bill Lewis, a lobbyist for Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

Texas leads the nation in alcohol-related driving fatalities, and 39 states already have sobriety checkpoints.

MADD did score one change in the law: Police who stop drunken-driving suspects and find they have a drunken-driving record will be allowed to require a blood test, improving the chances of a later conviction.

But most new laws are aimed at young drivers, and those who study teen drivers are happy about the changes.

Drivers younger than 18 can no longer use a cellphone to talk or text while driving.

Bernie Fette, a researcher at the Texas Transportation Institute who specializes in teen driving, said a 16-year-old is five times more likely to be involved in a fatal crash than any other age group.

He said that while parents and programs drill on drinking and driving and wearing a seat belt, the most dangerous activities for Texas teens are night driving and speeding.

Starting Tuesday, the prohibition against drivers younger than 18 being on the road between midnight and 5 a.m. will be extended from six months to one year after they get their license. Also extended is the law prohibiting young drivers from having more than one person younger than 21 in the car with them.

Federal highway statistics for 2008 show that of the 3,382 Texans killed in traffic accidents that year, 951 weren't wearing seat belts.

The Texas Safe Riders program (1-800-252-8255) can direct low-income residents on how to get free car seats by attending a one-hour safety program in their community, said program manager Johnny Humphreys.

The program distributed 10,000 car seats last year, he said.

## **NEW RULES OF THE ROAD**

**Seat belts:** All vehicle occupants must be strapped in. Violations are subject to fines up to \$200.

**Child car seats:** Any child younger than 8 – unless they are taller than 4 feet 9 inches – must be in a safety seat. Only warning tickets will be issued until June 1, after which fines of \$25 will be imposed.

**Cellphones:** No one younger than 18 can use a cellphone while driving. No one of any age can use a cellphone in a school zone, unless it's to make an emergency call, the vehicle is stopped or a hands-free device is used. Fines will be up to \$200.

**Insurance:** Driving with a suspended license or without insurance gets more costly – up to 180 days in jail and fines up to \$2,000. So does driving without a valid license or uninsured and causing injury or death in an accident – up to a year in jail and a maximum \$4,000 fine.

**Licensing:** For those younger than 18, a driving skills test will become mandatory to get a license. Also, the prohibitions against driving from midnight to 5 a.m. or driving with more than one person younger than 21 (unless a family member) are extended from six months to one year after obtaining a license.

**Motorcycles:** Proof that a certified training course has been completed will be needed to get a license. No passengers younger than 5 can ride. Fines are \$200.

**DWI:** Police can draw blood from drunken-driving suspects if records show a history of DWI offenses. Such drivers cannot refuse the test.