

## *The Statistics Don't Lie—But They May Mislead*

Confused as to whether to believe the figures of the N.C. Department of Public Education or the U.S. Department of Labor on the safety records of under-18-year-old drivers? No wonder—you've got good reason. Just look at Table 3, and you can see how the two sides could disagree on whether 16- and 17-year-old drivers have good safety records.

For instance, the five-year trend from 1982-83 to 1986-87 seems to show that 16- and 17-year-old drivers are getting safer, because the number of school bus accidents per million miles (see Row 6, bottom line) dropped steadily—from 10.3 accidents per million miles to just 6.6 accidents per million miles in 1986-87. And in 1986-87, the younger drivers' accident rate per million miles is better than drivers aged 18 and over—6.6 compared to 6.8 (Row 7, bottom line) for the older drivers.

But wait—compare the trends. During the same period, the 18-and-older drivers had a consistently low accident rate, hovering between 6.3 and 6.8 accidents per million miles, except in 1985-86, when it dropped to 5.5 per million miles (see Row 7). So over the long haul, the older drivers have a better record.

Or consider non-bus fatalities—that is, fatalities to passengers in other vehicles, or to pedestrians, caused in accidents with school buses. Based on non-bus fatalities per million miles, the younger drivers seem to have a better record for the last three years than do the 18-and-older drivers, whose accident record appears to rise steadily (see Rows 11 and 12). But the numbers are so low here that even the addition of one fatality might shift the findings in the opposite direction. So which drivers are safer? And which drivers would you prefer your children to ride with?

—Jack Betts

because so many student drivers would age out of the category by June. There would be a smaller pool of 16- and 17-year-old drivers, but the number of accidents would remain high, thus creating a worse driver-to-accident ratio for under-18-year-olds than really existed. A fairer picture would be presented by the ratio of accidents to miles driven by the different age groups, the state contended. The N.C. Department of Transportation's Alvin M. Fountain has urged that the state take a regular census of bus drivers at the end of each pay period, so accidents can be counted by the age of the driver at the time they occur, but DPE has not conducted such regular surveys.

In November 1987, seeking an extension of the exemption through the end of the current school year, Education Controller James Barber wrote the U.S. Labor Department that, based on miles driven, in 1986-87 student drivers were marginally *safer* than adults, according to the state Education Department's statistics. But an accompanying chart (developed from N.C. Department of Transportation statistics) in Barber's letter offered evidence to dispute his claim. That chart (*not* reprinted here) showed that 41 of the 80 passengers injured in 1986-

87 had been injured in buses driven by a 16-or 17-year-old.<sup>7</sup> Thus, each side's own evidence contained what appear to be arguments for and arguments against the continued use of under-18 bus drivers.

"We said they couldn't prove the student drivers were unsafe, and they said we couldn't prove [they were safe]," Gardner says. "We were phasing out the young drivers by 4 to 5 percent a year, and that's what they had been asking us to do—show progress. But apparently we weren't moving fast enough. We may not have had a clear policy [about the phase-out goal], but they didn't either." In December 1987, the U.S. Labor Department extended North Carolina's exemption from January to August 1988 on three conditions:

- that no dropouts or minors who had moving violations or who had been responsible for accidents during the year be hired;

- that no new 17-year-olds be trained to drive buses; and

- that all drivers be enrolled as students or be high school graduates. (A later requirement, imposed in February, mandated that all drivers have health certificates attesting to their physical health).