

In college, first year is by far the riskiest

By Robert Davis and Anthony DeBarros, USA TODAY

Daniel Reardon's nightmare began at 5:30 a.m. with a call from the University of Maryland police. His 19-year-old son, Danny, had taken part in a fraternity drinking ritual and was unconscious.

When Danny began college in fall 2001, his father, a dentist in Washington, D.C., had been confident that the teenager could take care of himself. After all, Danny had spent nine months after his high school graduation traveling across Europe. But Reardon hadn't counted on anything like this.

When Danny passed out at about 11:30 p.m. on Feb. 7, 2002, fraternity members put him on a sofa, took his pulse and according to court records and police reports, took turns watching him. Early the next morning, Danny stopped breathing. Students at the fraternity house called for an ambulance about 3:30 a.m., but Danny's brain had ceased functioning when he reached the hospital. He died six days later.

In one major respect, Danny was typical of many college undergraduates who die on or near campuses every year: He was a freshman who had been on campus only a few months.

A USA TODAY analysis of 620 deaths of four-year college and university students since Jan. 1, 2000, finds that freshmen are uniquely vulnerable. They account for more than one-third of undergraduate deaths in the study, although they are only 24% of the undergraduates at those institutions, according to National Center for Education Statistics data analyzed by the American Council on Education for USA TODAY.

College administrators, public health officials and parents increasingly have become concerned about the safety of college students after highly publicized deaths on campus from alcohol abuse and other causes. USA TODAY set out to take a close look at the problem, to study where and how students died over a six-year period and to determine whether their deaths could have been prevented.

Overall, the analysis of hundreds of reports from media, watchdog groups, schools and police found that illnesses, homicides and motor vehicle accidents are the leading causes of death, as they are for all Americans ages 15 to 24. Suicide claims as many lives as drugs and alcohol but is not always reported by the media, making the count in the analysis incomplete.

But the dominant finding is that freshmen emerge as the class most likely to make a fatal mistake:

- Freshmen die at higher rates from illness, accounting for 40% of undergraduate deaths from natural causes.
- They're more likely to take their own lives; they account for 40% of all undergraduate suicides.

- They represent half of all undergraduate deaths from falls from windows, balconies and rooftops.
- More of them die on school property; 47% of the undergraduates who die on campus are freshmen. This statistic has proven the most surprising, and disturbing, to analysts, experts and parents who imagine the campus to be idyllic. And safe.

"Parents want the university to be protective," says Ann Franke, president of Wise Results, a Washington-based education law and risk management firm. But because some students arrive on campus without the skills to deal with new risks, and because they have privacy and other adult rights, "no college can guarantee 100% safety for students," she says.

Tucker Brown, 21, a junior at the University of Georgia in Athens and vice president of the student government association, says the sudden freedom college brings has an effect. "I think naturally you come to college, you don't have your parents there anymore, you know you can go crazy," he said during a USA TODAY roundtable discussion in December on college drinking. "Not that you've been waiting to go crazy, but now it is an option, especially for those people who were on a tight leash."

Helen Johnson, a Chapel Hill, N.C.-based consultant in parent relations for universities, says students face different types of risks than those encountered by young adults who go directly into the workforce.

These students "have the rubric of being legal adults, and yet they are not completely independent or completely capable of making adult decisions," says Johnson, author of *Don't Tell Me What to Do, Just Send the Money: The Essential Parenting Guide to the College Years*. "Kids today have been more supervised and controlled than any other generation. It means they are ill-equipped to handle the responsibility and consequences of independent life."

Though relatively few drink themselves to death as Danny Reardon did, the analysis found that about one in five of the students who died had been drinking, which impaired judgment and contributed to their deaths. "Unfortunately, we are bringing our children into an environment that is extremely dangerous," Reardon says.

According to court documents, fraternity members put Danny in a room, closed the door and told others that they would care for him and to stay out. In a lawsuit, Danny's parents said that by preventing others "who might have been more responsible" from seeing their son, the fraternity members denied Danny "the help he obviously needed under the circumstances."

"Over a period of hours until he became cyanotic (a bluish discoloration caused by a lack of oxygen) during which time Daniel lay unconscious, unresponsive, and with vomit running from his nose," fraternity members and others "did homework and passed about the duty to watch Daniel," the civil suit said. The other students, the suit said, "provided absolutely no reasonable assistance to Daniel."

Reardon sued the fraternity and reached an undisclosed settlement with some of the students and Phi Sigma Kappa, which denied liability.

The biology of bad decisions

Many deadly decisions are made by underdeveloped brains, experts say. Research has shown that "the brain continues to develop after 18," says Denis McCarthy, a University of Missouri-Columbia researcher. "We used to think it was done. But a lot of the areas that are still developing have to do with making judgment calls."

USA TODAY's analysis shows that Danny Reardon's death fit a pattern of fatal mistakes in judgment. Other examples:

- Boston University freshman Molly Shattuck, 19, of Ipswich, Mass., and Andrew Voluck, 20, a sophomore from Blue Bell, Pa., died together on Feb. 9, 2005, while walking on train tracks. Transportation investigators say the pair might not have known that a fast-moving train is nearly silent to those walking in its path.
- Seth Korona, 19, of Marlton, N.J., was hand-standing on a beer keg at Indiana University on Jan. 28, 2001, when he fell, suffering a fatal brain injury, the coroner said.
- Robert Meythaler, 19, of Owensboro, Ky., fell over a balcony railing at Furman University in Greenville, S.C., during a spitting contest, police said.

'I was appalled'

The signs of death were obvious to emergency medical technician Thomas Dunn as he examined Lynn Gordon "Gordie" Bailey's face on Sept. 17, 2004. Answering a 911 call, rescuers found that the college freshman had died the previous night from an alcohol overdose.

Dunn felt sad for Bailey, 18, who had rude, sexual comments scribbled across his face. He says he knew the University of Colorado student's death would rock the state, which was reeling from the similar death of Colorado State University sophomore Samantha Spady 12 days earlier.

Spady, 19, of Beatrice, Neb., died after consuming 30 to 40 drinks over 11 hours, the coroner said. As he went door-to-door inside the Chi Psi house in Boulder, Dunn, a psychology professor at the University of Northern Colorado and part-time EMT, woke up students to ensure that there were no more victims from the initiation party. When he looked around the house littered with empty bottles, Dunn says, it was his experience as a teacher that spoke to him. "I thought, 'Where did we let these kids down?'" Dunn says. "Very little about that house, from what I saw, had any evidence of scholarly pursuits. ... I was appalled."

As Dunn woke up still-drunken students and told fraternity leaders that Bailey was dead, he watched them go from crying to becoming fearful and silent. "I worried about their lives, too," he says. "We're taking these kids whose brains are not fully developed, particularly the judgment centers, and they are drinking large quantities of alcohol, so their judgment goes completely out the window."

After Bailey's death, the Colorado Legislature enacted a law that grants immunity to anybody drinking illegally who calls 911 to get help for a drunken friend. Dunn says medics are now getting more calls. National fraternity leaders are encouraging students to call for help without worrying about getting the fraternity in trouble.

"One of the biggest problems out there is students are afraid to call for help," says Geof Brown, director of alcohol-education initiatives for the North America Interfraternity Conference, which has 5,500 chapters at 800 campuses. "Our groups are taking a more proactive posture these days."

Young people in the outside world are likely to share their daily lives with adults, but students who live on or near campus are surrounded by peers. Thus their lives can be in the hands of other freshmen when they most need help.

On Jan. 29, 2002, a delay in summoning help contributed to the loss of two lives at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. According to a university police report, nobody knew that Karen Hubbard, a 19-year-old freshman from Withee, Wis., was pregnant. Hubbard's weight gain had been attributed by her roommate to "the freshman 15" — the pounds often packed on during the first year of college.

Hubbard was grunting and moaning in pain inside a bathroom stall between 10 and 10:30 p.m., according to the report and handwritten accounts by the other students involved; the university refused to identify them. But Hubbard's dormmates left her alone when she insisted that she had a stomach flu.

Then they heard a loud splash of water and a baby crying. "I have babysat a lot over the past couple of years," one student wrote, "so to me, I clearly recognized this scream as an infant screaming."

The students left to get a resident assistant, who checked on Hubbard but accepted her statement that she just had an upset stomach. Then, the police report said, the students "heard the toilet flush three or four times, followed by a tiny baby whimper." But an hour passed before anyone peered over the edge of the stall. Hubbard bled to death that night. Her full-term baby girl, Julianna Marie Hubbard, was pulled from the toilet and revived, the police report said. But the baby died five days later.

None of the students was reprimanded, says Chuck Major, the university's housing director. "There were a lot of emotions going through the minds of a lot of the people, especially the resident assistant who was there," he says. He says the confusing question for students is: "How do I help a friend and yet not cross a boundary of being like Mom and Dad?"

College health experts say freshmen in trouble are often helped by their peers. "Student peers are actually the first ones who sense that there is something wrong," says Alan Glass, a physician on the board of the American College Health Association.

"I've seen numerous examples over the course of my career where other students brought to our attention their friends who were in need of medical attention." But Johnson, author of *Essential Parenting*, says freshmen are often ill-equipped to handle a real life-and-death situation. "The risk-taking part of their brain is fully developed, but the governor part that says 'stop' and 'wait' is not," she says. "One of the great tragedies is these young 18- or 19-year-olds will live with the knowledge that they could have done something, but they didn't."

Other freshmen have died when friends did not immediately call for help:

- Jonathan Thielen, 19, of Fridley, Minn., fell off a bunk bed in a University of Minnesota dorm early on Feb. 17, 2001, after a night of drinking, according to university police reports. Thielen began vomiting but told friends he was OK, the reports said. They helped him lie on the floor with his head on a pillow. "I assumed he was fine," the report quotes a student as saying, "because other friends of mine had fallen out of the bunk before." The report quotes another student as saying Thielen threw up a couple of more times, "but then he was sleeping OK. He was snoring rather loud." When students awoke the next morning, Thielen was dead of what the county medical examiner said were "traumatic head injuries due to fall."

- Travis Starr III, 19, of Martinez, Ga., fell out of the bed of a moving pickup carrying a group of students near the University of Georgia about 2 a.m. on April 17, 2003, an Athens-Clarke County Police report said. His friends took him home to his apartment where he was groggy for most of the day, the report says. Friends took him to the hospital at 10 p.m.; he lapsed into a coma and died eight days later.

- Joseph Kepferle, 18, of Lexington Park, Md., died on March 5, 2000, from bacterial meningitis at Towson University near Baltimore. Though he had been sick during the day, "his roommates thought he was either really hung over or had a bad case of the stomach flu," says his mother, Deborah Kepferle. "It wasn't until they saw the purple rash on his stomach and trunk that they knew that was something not normal."

Because meningitis can become a life-threatening infection within hours — and because freshmen living in dorms are more likely to contract the contagious infection than others their age — the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended this year that those students be vaccinated.

A ledge, a fatal fall

No matter how many safety classes colleges plan, some freshmen don't live long enough to take them. Jessica Horton, 18, of Suwanee, Ga., enrolled at the University of South Carolina, a college that for 35 years has taught students how to cope with freedoms through classes on safety called University 101.

After her family helped her move in on Aug. 17, 2002, Horton stayed up visiting with friends. Early in the morning, police investigators say, she climbed out of her sixth-floor dorm window to sit on a ledge. Police later found 11 Xanax tablets and a cut straw with traces of the drug in her purse, the report said. Horton had "snorted" the anti-anxiety drug in the past, a friend told police, according to their report.

Sitting on the ledge, she smoked a Camel cigarette and talked on her cellphone. Police believe she fell asleep there. At 6:20 a.m., a security guard saw Horton fall past a crape myrtle tree. She died before her family arrived home. The coroner found nearly twice the amount of Xanax in Horton's blood than is typically prescribed.

"It was a tragedy. When students engage in behavior that is unwise, often it is in the first weeks of school," says Dennis Pruitt, the university's vice president for student affairs. Safety efforts, he says, "don't take hold the first night, the first day or the first week. It takes some time."

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