Traffic Safety Facts
Laws

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Graduated Driver Licensing System

Background

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration encourages States to implement a graduated driver licensing (GDL) system. Easing young drivers onto the roadways by controlling their exposure to progressively more difficult driving experiences can reduce the incidence of traffic crashes involving young drivers.

A significant percentage of young drivers are involved in traffic crashes, and they are twice as likely as adult drivers to be in a fatal crash. Sixteen-year old drivers have crash rates that are about three times greater than 17-year-old drivers, five times greater than 18-year-old drivers, and approximately twice the rate of 85-year-old drivers. The factors contributing to these higher crash rates include lack of driving experience and inadequate driving skills; excessive driving during night-time, higher risk hours; risk taking behavior; poor driving judgment and decision making; drinking and driving; and distractions from teenage passengers.

To address these problems, traffic safety researchers developed a licensing system that would prolong the learning process for young novice drivers. Based on this system, NHTSA and the American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators developed an entry level driver licensing program to give young drivers more time to learn the complex skills required to operate a vehicle. The program consists of three stages, identified at each stage by the type of license: learner's permit, intermediate (provisional) license, and full licensure. Young drivers are required to demonstrate responsible driving behavior at each stage of licensing before advancing to the next level.

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Key Facts

- In 2006, 3,490 drivers 15 to 20 years old were killed and an additional 272,000 were injured in motor vehicle crashes.
- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for people age 15 to 20.
- In 2006, 7,463 drivers 15 to 20 years old were involved in fatal crashes—an 8-percent decrease from 8,074 involved in 1996. Driver fatalities for this age group increased by 3 percent between 1996 and 2006. For young males, driver fatalities rose by 5 percent, compared with a 3-percent decrease for young females.
- In 2006, 12.9 percent (7,463) of all drivers involved in fatal crashes (57,695) were young drivers 15 to 20 years old, and 16 percent (1,621,000) of all drivers involved in police-reported crashes (10,558,000) were young drivers.
- Twenty-eight percent (378) of the 15- to 20-year-old drivers involved in fatal crashes who had invalid operator's licenses at the time of the crash also had a previous license suspension or revocation.
- Thirty-one percent of 15- to 20-year-old drivers who were killed in motor vehicle crashes during 2006 had been drinking.
- In 2006, 64 percent of youth (age 15 to 20) who died in passenger vehicles were not wearing seat belts.
- In 2006, 39 percent of fatalities of 15- to 20-year-olds occurred in speed-related crashes.

- States with nighttime driving restrictions show crash reductions of up to 60 percent during restricted hours.
- GDL has been shown to reduce crashes by young drivers.

How Effective Are GDL Systems?

Evaluations clearly show the benefits of adopting GDL laws and GDL components. Florida's GDL law resulted in a 9-percent reduction in crashes for drivers who were 16 and 17 years old. Ongoing research in Michigan and North Carolina has shown a 26-percent and 25-percent reduction, respectively, in crashes involving 16-year-old drivers. Maryland and Texas GDL program showed similar success. GDL components adopted in the late 1970s and early 1980s also had positive effects. For instance, California reported a 5-percent reduction in crashes and a 10-percent reduction in traffic convictions for 16- and 17-year-old drivers, while Oregon saw a 16-percent reduction in crashes for male drivers age 16 and 17. A more recent evaluation of Oregon's GDL system demonstrated a 29-percent decrease in crash rates for 16-year-old drivers 3 years post-GDL implementation; there was a 16-percent decrease in crash rates for 17-year-old drivers.

Nova Scotia, Canada, reported a 29-percent reduction in crashes involving 16-year-old drivers while a preliminary report from Ontario, Canada, cites a 31-percent reduction in crashes for all drivers 15 to 19 years old. A recent national evaluation of GDL programs by Johns Hopkins University concluded that the most comprehensive programs are associated with reductions of about 20 percent in 16-year-old drivers' fatal crash involvement rates.

NHTSA recently released an evaluation of passenger restriction laws in terms of teen crash involvements. This study evaluated passenger restriction laws in three States: California, Massachusetts, and Virginia. Results demonstrated that, on average, there were 740 fewer 16-year-old drivers in California involved in crashes per year as a result of the passenger restriction law. There were 173 fewer 16-year-old driver involved in crashes per year in Massachusetts, and 454 fewer 16-year-old drivers in Virginia, both as a result of their passenger restriction laws.

How Does GDL Work?

In the mid 1990s, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, the National Safety Council, the National Transportation Safety Board, and NHTSA met to establish a national model for GDL. By establishing a national model, the various traffic safety groups sought to provide guidelines for States considering a GDL system.

The three stages of the GDL system include specific components and restrictions to introduce driving privileges gradually to beginning drivers. Novice drivers are required to demonstrate responsible driving behavior during each stage of licensing before advancing to the next level.

Each stage includes recommended components and restrictions for States to consider when implementing a GDL system. Examples of components and restrictions for each stage include:

Stage 1: Learner's Permit

- State sets minimum age for a learner's permit at no younger than age 16;
- Pass vision and knowledge tests, including rules of the road, signs, and signals;
- Completion of basic driver training;
- Licensed adult (who is at least 21 years old) required in the vehicle at all times;
- All occupants must wear seat belts;
- Teenage-passenger restrictions;
- Zero alcohol while driving;
- Permit is visually distinctive from other driver licenses;
- Must remain crash and conviction free for at least six months to advance to next level;
- Parental certification of 30 to 50 practice hours; and
- No use of portable electronic communication and entertainment devices.

Stage 2: Intermediate (Provisional) License

- Completion of Stage 1;
- State sets minimum age of 16.5;
- Pass a behind the wheel road test;
- Completion of advanced driver education training (safe driving decision-making, risk education, etc.)
- All occupants must wear seat belts;
- Licensed adult required in the vehicle from 10 p.m. until 5 a.m. (e.g., nighttime driving restriction);
- Zero alcohol while driving;

- Driver improvement actions are initiated at lower point level than for regular drivers;
- Provisional license is visually distinctive from a regular license;
- Teenage-passenger restrictions: not more than one teenage passenger for the first 12 months of intermediate license. Afterward, limit the number of teenage passengers to two until age 18;
- Must remain crash and conviction free for at least 12 consecutive months to advance to the next stage;
- Supervised practice; and
- No use of portable electronic communication and entertainment devices.

Stage 3: Full Licensure

- Completion of Stage 2;
- State sets minimum age of 18 for lifting passenger and nighttime restrictions; and
- Zero alcohol while driving.

Which States Have a GDL System?

No State has a GDL law with all of the recommended components. To date, 46 States and the District of Columbia have three-stage systems. States that have a two-stage system and lack an intermediate stage are Arkansas, Kansas, Minnesota, and North Dakota.

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Reports and additional information on this topic are available from your State Highway Safety Office; the NHTSA Regional Office serving your State; NHTSA Headquarters, Safety Programs Office, ATTN: NTI-122, 1200 New Jersey Avenue SE.; Washington, DC, 20590, 202 366 2724, or NHTSA's Web site at **www.nhtsa.gov.**