

10 Key Questions About Graduating Driver's Licensing

Why target only young people? Why not target all novice drivers?

The rationale for special policies for young beginning drivers is that their crash risk is particularly high. **Sixteen-year-old drivers have higher crash rates than drivers of any other age, including older teenagers.** The very youngest drivers are most likely to engage in risky behaviors such as speeding and tailgating. Because of their **inexperience**, beginners are least able to cope with hazardous situations. **When this is combined with their aggressive driving style, a high crash rate results.**

Graduated licensing introduces

beginners into the driving population in a low-risk manner, protecting both them and others. It should be noted that young people are subject to legal restrictions in a variety of areas such as voting, purchasing alcohol, serving in the military, and assuming financial obligations.

Isn't it unfair to restrict all teenage drivers? Why not just penalize the problem drivers?

We know some characteristics of younger drivers who are more likely than others to be in crashes, but it's impossible to identify them adequately on an individual basis and intervene before they get into crashes. Many U.S. licensing systems impose greater and/or earlier penalties on young people for traffic infractions than they do on older drivers, but most fatally injured young drivers don't have prior traffic violations or crashes on their records. **The logic of addressing all young people is that they all are beginners when they start driving. Every novice needs time to develop driving skills in low-risk settings.**

Two factors in particular work against young drivers: inexperience and immaturity. Young drivers need time to develop driving skills and the judgment to counteract their lack of on-the-road experience. Young drivers tend to be immature and impulsive, overestimating their own physical and driving abilities and underestimating dangers in the driving environment. **This leads them to risky driving behaviors such as speeding, passing inappropriately, following too closely, and driving without seat belts.** Young drivers frequently drive during nighttime high-risk hours, often with peers in the vehicle. **Passengers can cause distractions and create peer pressure to participate in risky behavior.** Teen passengers increase the crash risk for teenage drivers both during the day and at night. Considerable driving experience is required, after initial licensing, before a young novice achieves the dependable skills, judgment, and performance that result in safe driving.

Is a nighttime driving restriction a critical component of graduated licensing?

Yes. Forty-three percent of teenage motor vehicle deaths in 1998 occurred between 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. **Studies show nighttime driving restrictions are associated with crash reductions of up to 60 percent during restricted hours.**

These are different from curfews, which are viewed as means to get young people off the streets and into their homes at a set time. Communities often adopt curfews to reduce criminal or mischievous behavior, but **the purpose of night driving restrictions is to protect young beginners by keeping them from driving unsupervised during nighttime high-risk hours.** As part of a graduated licensing system, young beginners are encouraged to gain nighttime driving experience, but with adult

supervision rather than with peers. **Driving at night with peers in the car can lead to distractions and result in risky behavior, thus creating a greater crash risk.**

When should the nighttime driving restrictions begin? How early?

The majority of nighttime crashes occur in the hours before midnight. This is the time when more young people are out on the roads. Therefore, nighttime driving restrictions should begin several hours before midnight.

What guarantees more supervised driving will occur under graduated licensing?

There can be no guarantee. A young beginner can be encouraged to participate by requiring parents to attest to supervised training, by providing parents and teens with instructional materials, and by requiring successful passage of a more advanced performance test.

Do parents support graduated licensing programs?

Yes, parents strongly favor graduated licensing. A 1996 Insurance Institute for Highway Safety survey of parents of 15 year-olds in Florida who were about to enter a graduated licensing system found **95% of the parents supported a minimum period of supervised driving, 90% favored night driving restrictions, 60% favored restricting teen passengers during the first few months of driving,** and 74% of the parents favored a graduated licensing system that includes all of these components.

When these same parents were interviewed three years later, after their children had gone through Florida's graduated system, support for the restrictions was even stronger.

Also in 1996, parents of teenagers surveyed in Connecticut, Delaware, New Jersey, and New York said they strongly support graduated licensing requirements. **Although many parents want their children to get licenses early so they no longer have to be taken to school, work, or social activities, these same parents worry about the risks their children will be taking as new young drivers.**

Who supports graduated licensing?

Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, Allstate Insurance, American Academy of Family Physicians, American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators, American Automobile Association, American Coalition for Traffic Safety, American College of Emergency Physicians, American Insurance Association, Brain Injury Association, The Centers for Disease Control, General Federation of Women's Clubs, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, International Association of Chiefs of Police, and Mothers Against Drunk Driving. Additional supporters include the National Association of Governor's Highway Safety Representatives, National Association of Independent Insurers, National Center for Education in Maternal and Child Health, National Commission Against Drunk Driving, National Committee on Uniform Traffic Laws and Ordinances, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, National Safety Council, National Sheriffs' Association, National Transportation Safety Board, Police Executive Research Forum, USAA Insurance, The Distilled Spirits Council of the United States and its member companies, The Century Council, and The Beer Institute and its members.

Parents may be required to certify as many as 50 hours of daytime driving and 10 hours at night. Isn't this a bit much?

A graduated system requires a young driver to hold his or her permit for a minimum of six months. During this time a parent needs to familiarize the new driver with literally dozens of driving scenarios -- for example rural, urban, suburban, freeways, rush hour, nighttime, dusk, and rain. The time required of the parent or guardian is less daunting when viewed over the entire six months. **For example, 50 hours over 6 months equals just 8.3 hours per month, or a little more than 2 hours per week.**

Shouldn't teenagers be allowed to drive to school, work, and their extracurricular activities?

Yes. States can and do allow waivers so a teenager may drive during restricted times to work or to attend school activities. **These exemptions don't reduce the restrictions' effectiveness because the increased crash risk to teens at night is largely due to the combination of more difficult driving conditions and distractions caused by teenage passengers.** Young people driving to work are unlikely to have teen passengers. Another concern is the administrative burden on states that have to issue many waivers. Maryland examined this when it implemented a nighttime driving restriction and found it wasn't a problem. Graduated licensing does delay full licensure, but the evidence indicates it doesn't significantly hinder social activities. **Studies indicate that 16 year-olds have largely similar lifestyles in terms of social, dating, and work patterns, whether they live in states where many, some, or few 16 year-olds are licensed.**

Isn't driver education enough preparation for licensure?

A good driver education course, emphasizing on-the-road driving, is an effective way to learn basic vehicle control skills; **however, extensive research indicates that high school driver education doesn't lead to lower crash involvement compared with other ways of learning to drive.** Attitudes, decision-making skills, risk-taking tendencies, and other factors contribute in an important way to crashes and may not be affected much by driver education.

As indicated in a 1994 Report to Congress by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, experts agree that current novice driver education programs aren't doing a very good job of motivating youngsters to drive safely. Any driver education program should be integrated with a graduated licensing system.