

**Statement Before the
Transportation Committee,
State of Hawaii
House of Representatives**

**Young Drivers and
Graduated Licensing**

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The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety is a nonprofit research and communications organization that identifies ways to reduce motor vehicle crashes and crash losses. I am the Institute's chief scientist, and I am writing to address the issue of graduated licensing for young drivers. This is an area of special interest to the Institute. We have conducted research on the young driver problem for more than 20 years and published more than 50 articles on this topic in professional journals.

The young driver problem is well recognized and acknowledged. Less recognized is that the age group most affected by licensing policies — 16 year-olds — has by far the highest crash risk of drivers of any age. Nationally, the crash risk per mile driven by 16 year-olds is nearly three times that of 18-19 year-olds and 10 times the risk of drivers ages 30-59. The problem is that 16 year-olds, as a group, are inexperienced, and they are the youngest and most immature group holding licenses. The crash type most often associated with teenage drivers, especially 16 year-olds, is a single-vehicle, run-off-the-road collision involving speeding and multiple teenage passengers — the very type of crash often caused by immaturity and inexperience behind the wheel.¹

The methods we have relied on so far to try to reduce injuries associated with young drivers have not worked. Driver education is insufficient. Tougher penalty systems for young drivers, by themselves, have limited effects. States now are turning to graduated licensing as a way to cope with this major public health problem.

In the United States we typically have offered a quick and easy path to a full-privilege license at a very young age² — a policy that has allowed the combined effects of driving inexperience and youthfulness to take their toll. In a graduated system, full privileges are phased in so that beginners get their initial driving experience in lower risk settings. They gain on-the-road experience but are protected while doing so, first in a supervised learning phase and then in an intermediate licensing phase during which unsupervised driving is not allowed in high-risk settings — for example, late at night or with other teens in the car. Progress through these stages without incurring traffic violations or crashes leads to full-privilege licensure. The phase-in process takes some time, so young people are not only more experienced but somewhat older and more mature when they attain full privileges.

To most people, graduated licensing makes sense. After all, driving is such a complex skill that it cannot be learned overnight or in a few short weeks. It makes sense to employ a type of appren-

ticeship system for learners, especially because the consequences of driver error and misjudgment can be lethal.

Since 1996, all but a handful of states have adopted some form of graduated licensing. These systems vary substantially in terms of the provisions and duration of the licensing stages and other features — variations that are to be expected as jurisdictions adapt the idea of a graduated system to their own needs and preferences. On the other hand, such variations often create difficulty in jurisdictions where graduated systems are under consideration and policymakers do not necessarily know which features their own systems should include. To address this, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and the Traffic Injury Research Foundation of Canada have developed “A Blueprint for Graduated Licensing in North America,” which summarizes and assesses progress with graduated systems through 2002.³ This document also provides recommendations for graduated systems based on scientific research and on what such systems are intended to accomplish.

Night Driving Restrictions

Driving at night is a high-risk activity for people of all ages, especially the very youngest drivers. This is why night driving restrictions are included in 36 graduated licensing laws. We know such restrictions work because a few states have curtailed young people’s night driving since at least the 1960s. For example, New York’s restriction (9 p.m. to 5 a.m.) was established before 1970, and Pennsylvania’s (midnight-5 a.m.) took effect sometime before 1977. Both restrictions apply to 16 year-olds and to 17 year-olds who have not taken driver education. Although many teenagers say they sometimes violate these restrictions, surveys indicate good overall compliance.⁴

To the extent that restrictions cut down on driving at night, they reduce crashes. And the reductions are dramatic — a 62 percent crash reduction during restricted hours in New York, according to a 1984 study, and a 69 percent reduction in Pennsylvania.^{5,6} Although the percentage reduction in New York is smaller, the total number of crashes averted is much greater than in Pennsylvania because New York’s restriction covers the 9 p.m. to midnight hours, a time when many crashes involving young drivers occur. The same study found no evidence of spillover effects to unrestricted hours. Nor were there offsetting increases in injuries to 16-year-old passengers, pedalcyclists, or pedestrians during restricted hours.

The question is often asked, how can police enforce night driving restrictions? In reality, parents are the chief enforcers, and they overwhelmingly favor night driving restrictions. In states without such restrictions, parents want them enacted, and where nighttime restrictions exist parents are even more likely to endorse them.⁷ For example, 94 percent of parents of graduating seniors in New York State said they favor the 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. restriction. Parents generally approve of graduated licensing, too. In the absence of state requirements, most parents set up their own rules about where, when, and with whom their children can travel. However, it is much easier for parents to manage this difficult period if the state imposes sensible requirements for phasing in full driving privileges.

As might be expected, young people are not fond of driving restrictions that apply solely to them, although they do understand the rationale for such restrictions and adapt to them over time. For example, when 17-18 year-olds in New York and Pennsylvania were asked if they favor “some kind of night driving curfew for beginning teenage drivers,” 80 percent in Pennsylvania and 67 percent in New York said they favor curfews.⁸

It is important to recognize that these restrictions do not ban all driving at night. Driving under adult supervision is allowed, and all states allow unsupervised driving at night that is considered essential. For example, New York allows driving to work or school, and Pennsylvania allows driving to work or while performing volunteer fire department duties. The idea is to restrict high-risk recreational driving without hindering young people’s engagement in purposeful activities. Variations are to be expected in terms of what states consider essential and thus exempt from the restrictions.

Driving with Passengers

Another major risk factor for teenage drivers is the presence of passengers, especially teen passengers. For older drivers, passenger presence either has no effect on crash risk or decreases it, but for young drivers passengers greatly magnify the risk. That is, teenagers’ already high crash risk when driving alone increases dramatically when passengers are added. This effect is present both at night and during the day and is heightened if the passengers are teenagers — the more teens in the car the greater the risk.⁹ A recent study in Canada found that with two or more passengers, the crash risk for male and female teenage drivers was about five times as high as when driving alone.¹⁰

The reasons are obvious. Teenage passengers create distractions for drivers who are inexperienced to start with and who need to be paying full attention to the driving task. Plus the presence of peers in the car often induces young drivers to take risks. This is why 24 states have introduced passenger limitations as part of their graduated systems.

Effectiveness of Graduated Licensing

The North American graduated systems of the 1990s are so new that evidence of their effectiveness only now is beginning to accumulate — and the evidence is positive. Graduated licensing systems have been shown to be effective in New Zealand and Canada.¹¹⁻¹³ Evaluations in several U.S. states have also shown positive effects. Florida enacted the first of the modern U.S. graduated systems, featuring a six-month learner's stage and night driving restrictions until age 18.¹⁴ A recent study found a 9 percent reduction in injury crashes among 15-17 year-olds during the first full year of this system, which translates to the prevention of 1,167 injury crashes. Studies in North Carolina, Ohio, and Michigan have found even more positive reductions in crashes, between 20 and 30 percent.¹⁵

The question is not whether graduated licensing is effective. It is, and the only question is precisely how effective. Of course, such licensing systems are not panaceas. There will still be a problem because teenagers will still be relatively young and inexperienced when they get their licenses. Besides, compliance with restrictions will not be universal. At the same time, graduating licensing represents a giant step forward in addressing this major public health problem.

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