

Surviving Driving

Immaturity and inexperience add up to disaster for many teen drivers. Some 6,000 are killed each year and 300,000 injured. But state laws can reduce the risks.

By Melissa Savage

For teens, the license to drive is the key to freedom. The end of humiliating trips in the family van with mom or dad at the wheel. The end of waiting for a ride. The big step toward adulthood.

For parents, it's another kind of freedom. The end of carpooling and chauffeuring headaches. But it also is sleepless nights waiting for a young driver to come home.

Each year 6,000 don't, and their parents live their worst nightmare: receiving the dreaded phone call telling them that their child has been killed in a crash. For 300,000 more parents each year, it means learning that their young driver has been injured.

Teens are more likely to speed and tailgate and less likely to wear seat belts than older drivers. It's no wonder accident rates for this age group are high. The National Safety Council reports that 20 percent of 16-year-old drivers will be involved in a crash at some point during their first year of driving—the accident rate is the highest during the first month. And 16-year-old drivers are three times more likely to end up in a wreck than older teens.

The big step toward adulthood comes with tremendous responsibility—and the need to make mature choices.

But teens are often ill-equipped to make the split-second decisions that can keep them safe on the road. Inexperience and immaturity behind the wheel is the leading cause of death for teens.

Crashes not only cause serious physical and emotional pain, they are costly. In 2001, car wrecks involving teen drivers cost taxpayers \$42.3 billion for emergency services, medical and rehabilitation costs, productivity losses and property damage, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Melissa Savage tracks traffic safety issues for NCSL.

THE FACTS

5,933

The number of teen drivers killed in 2002.

324,000

The number of teenagers injured in car accidents that year.

\$42.3 billion

The annual cost (emergency services, medical and rehabilitation, and property damage) of car wrecks caused by teen drivers.

20

The percentage of 16-year-olds involved in an accident during their first year of driving.

36

The number of states, plus the District of Columbia, with graduated driver's licensing laws.

37

The number of states, plus D.C., that have nighttime restrictions on teen drivers.

21

The number of states, and D.C., that limit the number of young passengers in cars driven by teens.

Once teens gain experience, they are safer and less likely to crash, studies show.

TIMES HAVE CHANGED

Until the mid-1990s, all it took for most teens to get their license was reaching their 16th birthday, a written exam and a road test. Teens were free to drive anywhere, any time with anyone. But times have changed. Now graduated driver's license laws appear to be sav-

ing young lives.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety recommends that states implement a learner's phase that begins at age 16, lasts at least six months and includes 30 to 50 hours of supervised driving. The group recommends an intermediate phase that lasts until age 18 and includes a restriction on driving after 9 or 10 p.m. and no teen passengers in the car. Full licensure would be granted at 18.

Graduated driver's license (GDL) laws—even those that may be considered inadequate—do decrease accident rates for teen drivers. In Florida, fatality and injury accidents among 15- to 17-year-old drivers dropped after the law was adopted.

California saw a 23 percent decline in fatal and at-fault injury accidents for 16-year-olds. Teen passenger deaths decreased by 40 percent after its GDL law went into effect.

CURBING TEEN DEATHS

Traffic safety experts believe that restricting teen nighttime driving during the critical hours of 9 to 11 p.m. and limiting the number of teen passengers to only one, or ideally to none, are the best ways to curb deaths.

Reduced visibility, glare from oncoming traffic and fatigue make nighttime a challenge for all drivers, but especially for teens. The risk of being killed at night is especially high for beginning drivers—nearly three times higher than during the day for 16-year-olds—according to a study in the *Journal of Safety Research*. Restrictions that allow teens to drive at night with supervision lower the number of crashes during restricted hours by as much as 60 percent, the journal says.

North Carolina teens must be off the roads from 9 p.m. to 5 a.m. Idaho restricts teen drivers from sunset to sunrise. In South Carolina, teen drivers aren't allowed on the roads from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m.



Nighttime driving restrictions are not meant to be curfews, but rather to encourage supervised driving. “Most states already have curfews in place so teens shouldn’t be out anyway,” says Ashley Connors, Students Against Destructive Decisions student of the year.

She also believes that these laws encourage teens to make better choices, which can be hard when faced with peer pressure. “If a law is in place, it’s easier to say no to risky behavior. The law backs them up,” she says.

LIMITING DISTRACTIONS

Maine and New Jersey recognize that young drivers talking on their cell phones are not focused on the road, so they have outlawed it for drivers under age 21.

Traffic safety advocates expect more states to pass similar laws in the future since studies have shown that new drivers are not able to drive safely and talk on the phone simultaneously.

Teen passengers pose another risk. Just one other teen in the car increases the crash risk by 50 percent, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Three or more passengers increase the risk of a wreck by four times more than if the teen is driving alone.

California bans teens transporting anyone under the age of 20 for the first six months

CORE ELEMENTS OF GRADUATED DRIVER’S LICENSES

Stage One: Learner’s Permit

Minimum age for a permit is 16. Must hold the permit for a minimum of six months. Parents must certify at least 30 to 50 hours of supervised driving.

Stage Two: Intermediate

This stage lasts until at least age 18. It includes both a night driving restriction starting at 9 or 10 p.m. and a strict teenage passenger restriction allowing none or no more than one.

Stage Three: Full Licensure

Source: Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2003

of their provisional licenses, unless accompanied by a parent or adult over 25. Teens can drive without supervision if the young passengers are family members, and a parent approves.

A 2003 Illinois law prohibits teens under 18 from driving with more than one passen-

ger under age 20. Exceptions to the law include siblings and other family members. “This is a great bill,” says Senator John Cullerton who sponsored it. “There was no organized opposition to it. And once suburban moms heard the statistics, they were supportive.”

Although the Illinois bill faced little opposition, one in Maryland did. Sponsored by Delegate Adrienne Mandel, the bill would have prohibited drivers under 18 from transporting any teen passengers during the first six months of their provisional licenses. After that, they could drive with only one teen passenger until they turned 18. The bill was designed to restrict the “usual rolling party of seven, eight, nine teens crammed into a vehicle, and it’s easy for police to enforce,” says Mandel.

Opponents argued that restricting passengers would result in more teen drivers on the road. Others wanted exemptions for teenage family members to ride as passengers.

Delegate Mandel will introduce the bill again this session because “no GDL law is complete without a passenger restriction.”

Traffic experts support the kinds of restrictions in graduated driver’s license bills.

“Our objective is not to write more tickets, prohibit teens from driving or get in the way of family mobility,” says Chuck Hurley, vice president of the National Safety Council. “We know how we can reduce crashes, injuries and fatalities. We know how we can save families and society money. We know how we can spare families, high schools and communities painful and numbing tragedies. And we should do that.”



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