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Article abstract

Although there is substantial variation in licensing policies in the United States, most states offer easy licensing at an early age. These policies have been associated with very high crash rates for young people, particularly 16 and 17-year-olds. A major shift in licensing regulations is now underway, with graduated licensing systems beginning to be introduced. In graduated licensing, on-road driving is encouraged but in lower-risk situations before full privileges are granted. In 1996, several states enacted graduated licensing provisions, and more are expected to do so in 1997. Provisions of graduated licensing such as night driving curfews for initial licence holders are the subject of considerable debate, as states struggle with setting the appropriate balance between mobility for young people and safety. Parents of teenagers are among the strongest supporters of graduated licensing.

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by Allan F. Williams

RÉSUMÉ

Quoique les politiques d'émission de permis soient sujettes à des variations importantes d'un État à l'autre, la plupart d'entre elles proposent des permis sans trop de difficultés à un âge relativement précoce. Ces politiques ont été associées à des taux de collision très élevés en ce qui concerne les jeunes conducteurs, particulièrement vers l'âge de 16 et de 17 ans. Un tournant important dans la réglementation est en cours, grâce à l'introduction de systèmes graduels d'émission. Dans un tel système, on encourage la conduite routière, dans les situations où la fréquence des risques est faible, avant que le titulaire ait droit à tous les privilèges d'un détenteur de permis. En 1996, plusieurs États ont adopté des dispositions relatives au système graduel d'émission de permis, et l'on prévoit qu'en 1997 un plus grand nombre d'États feront de même. De telles dispositions font l'objet d'un vif débat, notamment la conduite de nuit pour les jeunes conducteurs détenant un permis provisoire, dans la mesure où les États font des efforts pour rechercher un juste milieu entre la mobilité et la sécurité. Les parents des jeunes conducteurs figurent parmi les plus ardents partisans du système graduel d'émission de permis.

ABSTRACT

Although there is substantial variation in licensing policies in the United States, most states offer easy licensing at an early age. These policies have been associated with very high crash rates for young people, particularly 16 and 17-years-olds. A major shift in licensing regulations is now underway, with graduated licensing systems beginning to be introduced. In graduated licensing, on-road driving is encouraged but in lower-risk situations before full privileges are granted. In 1996, several states enacted graduated licensing provisions, and more are expected to do so in 1997. Provisions of graduated licensing such as night driving curfews for initial licence holders are the subject of considerable debate, as states struggle with setting the appropriate balance between mobility for young people and safety. Parents of teenagers are among the strongest supporters of graduated licensing.

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In the United States, each of the 50 states and the District of Columbia has a different licensing system for passenger vehicle operation. There is substantial variation, but in general, easy licensing is allowed at an early age. The typical licensing age is 16, although the minimum age for a regular license varies from 14 to 17: One state (South Dakota) licenses at age 14, six states at age 15, 42 states and the District of Columbia at age 16, and one state (New Jersey) at age 17. Countries such as Canada and Australia also generally license at age 16, whereas most European countries withhold passenger vehicle licensure until age 17, or more typically, age 18 (Laberge-Nadeau, Maag, and Bourbeau, 1992). European countries also differ from the United States in that licenses are relatively expensive, and licensing exams more difficult.

Many states have minimal preclicensure requirements. For example, the majority of states allow learners' permits to be obtained, but more than one-third of the states do not require them. Of those states that require permits, only 17 require them to be held for a minimum length of time, and the specified holding periods are generally of short duration. Although parents usually impose their own requirements during the learning stage, there are many states in which young people upon reaching age 16 could, without having had a learner's permit or any formal driver education, take a relatively easy driving test and get a full privilege driver's license if they passed (Williams et al., 1996).

Although it may be quite easy to obtain a license, some of the toughest licensing conditions and restrictions in the world also are found in the United States. For example, six states have had night driving curfews for initial license holders since the 1960s or early 1970s. The curfew in New York is the most stringent — beginning at 9 p.m. and applying to all 16 year-olds and to 17 year-olds who have not taken driver education. Curfews have been found to be very effective in reducing motor vehicle crashes (Williams and Preusser, 1997).

About half the states require driver education as a condition of licensure prior to age 18. Many states have probationary systems featuring earlier intervention for young drivers with violations and crashes on their records and/or more stringent penalties than those that apply to adult drivers. Probationary systems have had some modest success in reducing the young driver crash problem (Mayhew and Simpson, 1990).

Formal driver education, though it can be an effective way for beginners to learn how to drive, has not been found to lead to reduced crash involvements of its graduates when compared with

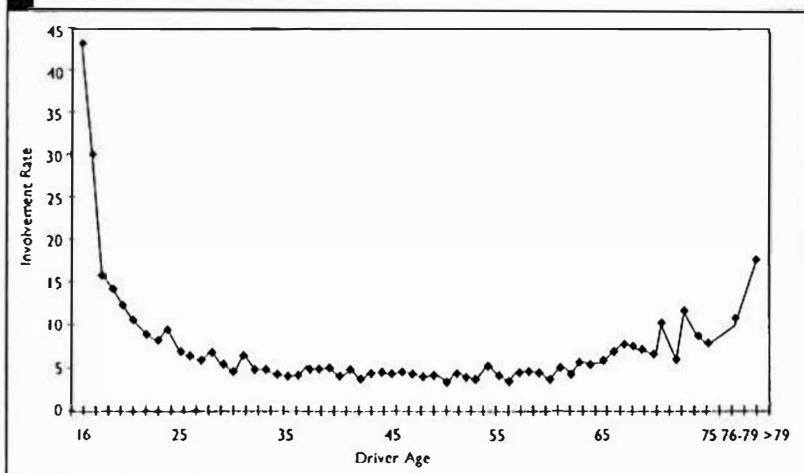
the crash involvements of those who learned how to drive by some other method. According to a recent comprehensive international review of driver education evaluation studies (Mayhew and Simpson, 1996), "The review of scientific evaluations performed to date provides little support for the claim that driver instruction is an effective safety countermeasure." Similarly in Europe, where young people typically learn to drive in professional driving schools, a recent assessment by the European Transport Safety Council (1996) led to the conclusion that, "What we see across the European Union are training regimes which have demonstrably failed their largest client market — the young driver."

Every motorized society has a young driver problem resulting from the combination of driving inexperience and characteristics associated with youthful age. In the United States, with its early and easy licensing, the problem is acute. Figure 1 shows the crash rate per mile driven by age, indicating the elevated rate for teenagers in general (four times that of older drivers), and the particularly high rate for 16 year-olds (almost three times that of 18-19 year-olds).

■ TRENDS IN LICENSING POLICIES

Minimum licensing ages were established in the early 1900s and have undergone little change ever since. In recent years, the

FIGURE I
ALL CRASH INVOLVEMENT PER MILLION MILES
BY DRIVER AGE, 1990



only significant change in the United States is that Mississippi raised its licensing age from 15 to 16. Interestingly, there has been some movement in Europe to lower the age at which driving can start. For example, Sweden in 1993 reduced the permissible age for driving under supervision from 17 1/2 to 16, although the licensing age remained 18 (Gregerson, 1996). Beginning in 1995, Norway implemented a new system to provide drivers with more opportunity to practice under supervision by lowering the starting age from 17 to 16. In the late 1980s, France introduced an "apprentissage" scheme allowing driver training and supervised driving to begin at age 16 (Lynam and Twisk, 1995).

Most of the recent activity with regard to licensing systems has been directed not to the licensing age requirements but to the inexperience component through changes in training requirements and conditions for getting a license. The focus has been on a system called graduated licensing. Graduated licensing has two stages prior to full privilege driving: A learner's period of set minimum duration (six months or more) during which supervised driving is allowed and encouraged, and an initial license that for a set period of time (generally one year or more) allows unsupervised driving only during lower risk situations. Driving unsupervised during higher risk situations (e.g., late at night, with other teenagers in the car, on high-speed expressways) is prohibited. If young persons go through these stages without incurring crashes or violations, they graduate to a full privilege license. Well designed graduated licensing systems address the inexperience issue by allowing more time for practice driving. They also indirectly address the maturity issue in that by lengthening the licensing process, young persons will be somewhat older before they can obtain a full privilege license.

Graduated licensing activity has been concentrated in countries that license at an early age. New Zealand introduced graduated licensing in 1987, and Victoria, Australia enacted a version of graduated licensing in 1990. In 1994, Ontario and Nova Scotia in Canada introduced graduated licensing systems, and other provinces including British Columbia and Quebec are considering doing so.

Currently, there is intense interest in graduated licensing in the United States. Nearly every major safety organization has endorsed it, and it has received extensive media coverage. In 1996, several states enacted graduated licensing systems or elements thereof, and in 1997, at least 12 states are known to be introducing graduated licensing bills.

Why is there now such interest in graduated licensing in the United States and in other countries? After all, the concept of graduated licensing has been around and discussed since the early 1970s, and the young driver problem has been recognized as a serious problem for decades. During the 1970s and 1980s, there seemed to be only minimal interest in graduated licensing in North America, and scant interest in finding new ways to address the young driver problem. In a Canadian review of the young driver problem in 1981 (Mayhew et al., 1981), the researchers expressed concern about the “failure of existing efforts to effect meaningful reductions in the magnitude of the problem” and said that several questions “must be addressed as a matter of considerable urgency.” Two of these questions were, “Can we continue to justify, as a society, a continued commitment to a status quo posture, wherein a disproportionate number of young people annually lose their lives or suffer disabling injuries as a result of motor vehicle traffic crashes?” And, “Are we prepared to undertake the level of commitment required to rectify this situation?” Commenting on these questions in a 1987 article, I noted that to the extent that limits on mobility such as night driving curfews are necessary to rectify the situation, “the second question can at present be answered in the negative” (Williams, 1987).

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration developed a model graduated licensing law in 1976 and encouraged states to adopt it (Teknekron, 1977). Maryland in 1979 and California in 1983 changed their licensing systems. The Maryland and California “provisional” licensing systems, as they were called, were successful in reducing crashes though they fell short of the model law (Hagge and Marsh, 1988; McKnight, Hyle and Albright, 1983). Other states considered but rejected graduated licensing provisions in the 1970s and early 1980s.

The groundswell for graduated licensing in North America in the 1990s is a secular trend not fully explainable. It likely has to do with the recognition that the young driver problem has persisted, and that existing licensing systems have not been very effective in ensuring young driver safety. The burgeoning popularity of graduated licensing follows the successful launch of New Zealand’s system which achieved at least a 7 percent reduction in crashes among 15-19 year-olds, and the system was generally accepted by its participants (Langley, Wagenaar, and Begg, 1996; Begg et al., 1995). There also seems to be greater recognition now that current driver education for young people is not a solution to the young driver problem. Driver education, along with penalties for those who

exhibit driving deficiencies, have traditionally been the cornerstones of efforts to deal with this problem. As the concept of graduated licensing has become better known, there also is growing recognition that it represents a sensible way to introduce beginners to full privilege driving by allowing them to gain experience under protected conditions. The endorsements by safety organizations have resulted in much publicity about graduated licensing and created a “bandwagon” effect.

Graduated licensing does limit the mobility of young people, and there is still considerable question about the extent to which state and provincial legislatures will enact graduated licensing provisions. Opponents of graduated licensing components such as night driving curfews have characterized them as unfair to young people, arguing that even though supervised nighttime and essential driving such as to and from work are typically allowed, curfews penalize everyone of that age including many responsible drivers. However, all beginners are inexperienced drivers in need of on-road practice to become more proficient at this complex task, and it makes sense that they obtain their initial experience in lower-risk situations. Clearly the policies of graduated licensing involve trade-offs, and societies have to decide where to strike the balance between mobility for young people and safety concerns for them and other road users. What does being “fair” to young people mean in this context? This is the question now being debated in North America.

As in the case of seat belt use laws, Canada has been the North American leader in graduated licensing. In part, this is due to the activities of the Traffic Injury Research Foundation, which through conferences, publications, and other forums, has focused attention to the young driver problem and has been a catalyst for graduated licensing legislation.

In Canada, graduated licensing systems apply to beginners of any age. In the United States, graduated systems will apply only up to age 18 - the legal age of adulthood. In 1996, legislative activity in the United States addressed both the initial learner’s stage of graduated licensing and the restricted license stage. Most of the action taken dealt with the learners stage as six states (Connecticut, Florida, Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, and Virginia) established minimum learner’s permit periods of six months. Florida and Michigan went further and enacted night driving curfews for initial license holders.

Imposing a six-month learner's period is a step forward, but a key aspect of graduated licensing is limitations on initial driving once the driving test has been passed. This is the stage of driving that is most dangerous for young beginners (Williams et al., 1995; Williams et al., 1996). Some states have balked at this. For example, in both Connecticut and Kentucky, curfews were in early versions of the licensing bills but were dropped.

The research basis for graduated licensing has been clearly established (Simpson and Mayhew, 1992; Williams, 1996). Now, as graduated systems are being introduced, it will be important to document their effects. It will take some time to determine the effect of U.S. graduated systems licensing on crash involvement. However, recent surveys of parents indicate that the incoming systems are highly acceptable to them. When parents of 15 year-olds in Connecticut and Florida were surveyed by telephone, support for the new licensing systems was strong (Williams et al., 1996). Parents whose sons and daughters were about to enter the new systems endorsed them, even though there was recognition that they and their children would be inconvenienced to some extent, and many wanted even tougher licensing provisions. Ninety percent of Florida parents supported the night driving curfew that had been enacted, and 82 percent of Connecticut parents supported a curfew even though legislators in Connecticut had rejected this provision. Other surveys also have found strong parent support for graduated licensing (Ferguson and Williams, 1996). The required limitations on driving in graduated systems aid and support parents' efforts to get their sons and daughters through this dangerous period.

In summary, a major shift in licensing systems in North America is underway. This shift should have the effect of reducing the young driver problem. Since we now have entered a period of accelerated growth in the teenage population, the emergence of graduated licensing is timely.

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