



History and current status of state graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws in the United States



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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The objective of this study is to describe changes in teenage driver licensing policies in the United States during the past two decades with the introduction of graduated driver licensing (GDL) programs, assess GDL laws currently in place, and discuss the possibilities and likely consequences of further changes. **Methods:** The history of laws introducing and amending GDL programs was tracked, based on records maintained by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS). Counts of states included the District of Columbia. **Results:** A few states had elements of GDL prior to the mid-1990s, and between 1996 and 2006 all other states adopted a learner period of 2 months or more, a minimum supervised practice hours requirement for the learner period, or a night or passenger restriction once initially licensed. All but seven states have upgraded their original laws one or more times. Very few states weakened their laws, usually in minor ways. In 158 instances, minimum learner periods, minimum practice hour requirements, or night or passenger restrictions were added or strengthened. Fifteen states raised the minimum age for a license allowing any unsupervised driving. **Conclusion:** GDL policies have reduced teenage driver crashes. Most states now have at least minimum requirements for basic GDL features, although there is substantial opportunity for strengthening existing policies. Additional upgrades would result in further crash reductions, but very few have been made in recent years. **Practical applications:** Guidelines for maximizing the crash reduction potential of GDL programs are available, based on the experience of U.S. states, other countries with GDL programs, and the evaluation literature in regard to GDL components.

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1. Introduction

During the past two decades, teenage driver licensing laws in the United States have undergone major changes with the widespread introduction of graduated driver licensing (GDL) programs. GDL is a risk management system, designed to phase in novices to full driving privileges by controlling exposure to progressively more difficult driving situations. The intention is to protect beginners while they are learning, as well as other road users they encounter. Conceptually, GDL is designed to deal with novice driver inexperience. The basic structure is a minimum learner period of several months or more, allowing the accumulation of practice driving under supervision (generally a driving instructor, parent, or other licensed adult), and an intermediate licensing stage with restrictions on unsupervised high-risk driving, such as late at night or with young passengers present. In almost all states, GDL requirements apply only to beginning drivers younger than 18.

GDL systems replaced teenage licensing programs that, in most cases, allowed easy access to full driving privileges at a very young age, generally 16 or earlier. Pre-GDL licensing regimes have been

described in detail (Williams, Weinberg, Fields, & Ferguson, 1996). In 1996, only 11 states had required learner's permit holding periods that, in most cases, were short, 14–30 days, with none exceeding 90 days. Nine states had night driving restrictions; none had passenger restrictions.

GDL had been discussed in the United States since the early 1970s. GDL builds on existing licensing systems by adding or extending the learner period and adding an intermediate phase limiting driving in riskier situations unless a qualified supervisor is in the vehicle. Until the mid-1990s, this approach was unpopular, despite the logic of introducing young beginners to an activity in which competence is attained gradually and mistakes can have lethal consequences. However, starting in 1996 GDL policies were adopted in all states and the District of Columbia.

It is not fully understood why GDL became so popular after more than two decades of indifference or rejection (Williams, 2005). However, research studies played a role. Evaluations of long-standing night driving restrictions found that they were effective in reducing teenage crashes (Williams & Preusser, 1997). Research had identified an increased crash risk for teenagers when they transported young passengers (Williams, Ferguson, & McCartt, 2007). In 1987, New Zealand adopted a GDL program that included both night and passenger

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restrictions, and research indicated that crashes were reduced and public acceptance was high (Begg & Stephenson, 2003). Reports of crash reductions in the earliest U.S. states to adopt GDL (Foss, Feaganes, & Rodgman, 2001; Shope, Molnar, Elliott, & Waller, 2001; Ulmer, Preusser, Williams, Ferguson, & Farmer, 2000) encouraged other states to do so. Parents of teenagers strongly approved of GDL policies (Ferguson & Williams, 1996; Ferguson, Williams, Leaf, Preusser, & Farmer, 2001). Thus, it was increasingly clear that GDL was an evidence-based program that would be widely accepted and advance the goal of reducing teenage crashes.

It has been almost two decades since GDL programs began to be introduced on a widespread basis in the United States. The purpose of this paper is to trace the initiation and evolution of GDL programs and summarize the laws now in place. The description of the evolution of GDL traces the introduction and changes in what were initially considered to be the core features: a learner period of several months or more and a night restriction and a passenger restriction when initially licensed. In addition, the requirement for supervised practice driving hours, which supplements the learner period, is tracked.

Since GDL began to be introduced, cellphone calling and texting have been identified as risk factors (Durbin, McGehee, Fisher, & McCartt, 2014). Bans on these activities that apply only to teenage drivers are sometimes considered to be a feature of GDL and are included in descriptions of current programs. States vary in whether these laws apply to teenagers of a certain age (e.g., younger than age 18) or license stage (e.g., learner's permit or intermediate license). Laws focusing on cellphone use among teenage drivers generally prohibit any use of an electronic device/telecommunications device/cellphone whether hands-free or hand-held so that in most, but not all, cases the laws apply to texting.

Minimum licensing ages are not inherently part of GDL systems. However, they are important aspects of licensing systems as it is well established that older permit and older intermediate licensing ages have safety benefits (McCartt, Teoh, Fields, Braitman, & Hellinga, 2010; Williams, McCartt, Mayhew, & Watson, 2013), and GDL policies can affect these ages. Thus, in addition to tracking the introduction of GDL features, the variation and changes in minimum ages for the learner, intermediate, and full license stages will be presented and discussed. In some cases, learner starting ages were changed with the introduction of GDL. In some states, minimum intermediate licensing ages were raised directly or indirectly through changes to learner's permit policies. Minimum full license ages vary depending on terms set for the duration of the intermediate stage.

This historical exercise allows future directions to be explored, based on the experience of U.S. states, the experience of other countries with GDL programs, and the collective knowledge from research studies as to what GDL features work best to reduce teenage driver crash involvement.

2. Methods

In tracking the GDL laws, a supervised learner holding period of at least 2 months was included. A night restriction when initially licensed was included, whatever the starting and ending times. A passenger restriction allowing 0–3 passengers of whatever ages in this initial licensing stage was included. Any requirement for a minimum number of practice driving hours in the learner stage was counted.

Laws that prohibit the use of cellphones while driving and laws that target texting while driving were tracked if the law specifically targeted teenage drivers. Historical counts include texting laws targeting only teenage drivers even if the law was superseded by a later law applying to drivers of all ages. Counts of current texting laws include only the laws specifically targeting teenage drivers.

In some states, GDL requirements are lessened for those who have taken driver education, a practice that is not justified by research evidence and that can have detrimental effects (Mayhew, 2007; Mayhew, Williams, & Pashley, 2014). In states where driver education modifies

GDL requirements, the weaker driver education track was used for the purpose of describing the systems.

The information on state GDL laws, law changes, and current features including cellphone and texting laws was obtained from a historical record of all such laws, maintained by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2015a). Data collection methods include primary source searches of state motor vehicle codes using LexisNexis and State Net, a subsidiary of LexisNexis. GDL laws are classified according to the date they took effect, not when they were enacted.

Time periods covered are pre-1996 to 2006, when core GDL features were initially introduced in states, and 1998 to 2015, the period over which original laws were amended. The information is current as of January 2015. Note that the District of Columbia (DC) is included in state counts.

3. Results

3.1. Initial laws

Table 1 summarizes when states first introduced at least one of the initial core GDL elements (a learner holding period of at least 2 months, a night restriction, and a passenger restriction). Nine states had night restrictions prior to 1996, and four other states required learner periods of 2 months or more. Florida implemented the first multi-component GDL system in 1996, and 37 other states implemented at least one initial core GDL feature during the next decade, most doing so during the 1996–2001 period.

GDL was introduced in most states on a piecemeal basis. For example, states most often started out with just a learner period of several months, usually six. Night restrictions were more common than passenger limits. The first passenger limit was implemented in 1997. In the introductory state laws that went into force during 1996–2006, 14 states had a required learner period plus both night and passenger restrictions, and eight states had a required learner period and either a night restriction or a passenger restriction but not both.

In addition to implementing the initial core elements of GDL, about half the initial state laws specified that a minimum number of hours of supervised driving had to be attained prior to taking the driving test to enter the intermediate stage. The first such law was implemented in 1997.

3.2. Amendments to initial GDL laws

All but seven states have strengthened their initial GDL requirements by adding features or strengthening them, that is, lengthening the learner period duration, reducing the start time for night restrictions, decreasing

Table 1

Number of states first introducing one or more of the initial core GDL features (minimum learner period of 2 months or more, night restriction, or passenger restriction during initial license phase), by year.

Year	Number of states
Pre-1996	13
1996	4
1997	6
1998	2
1999	9
2000	6
2001	6
2002	2
2003	0
2004	1
2005	1
2006	1

Note: the District of Columbia is included in state counts.

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