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# Age of licensure and monitoring teenagers' driving: Survey of parents of novice teenage drivers

Anne T. McCartt<sup>a,\*</sup>, Laurie A. Hellinga<sup>a</sup>, Emily R. Haire<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 1005 North Glebe Road, Arlington, VA 22201 USA

<sup>b</sup> Preusser Research Group, Inc., 7100 Main Street, Trumbull, CT 06611 USA

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## Abstract

**Objective:** To assess parental decision making regarding the timing of teenagers initiating driving and monitoring teenagers' driving after licensure. **Methods:** About 300 parents were interviewed during spring 2006 in Minnesota, North Carolina, and Rhode Island, states with varying licensing provisions, while teenagers took their first on-road driving tests. **Results:** States' differences in ages of obtaining learner's permits and licenses reflected different licensing laws, but most teenagers obtained permits and took road tests within the first few months after they became eligible. Common reasons for delaying obtaining permits were fulfilling driver education requirements and lack of readiness/immaturity. Insufficient practice driving most often delayed licensure. Among the parents interviewed, 33–49% believed the minimum licensure age should be 17 or older. Almost all parents planned to supervise teenagers' driving after licensure, and most wanted to know about speeding or distractions. When asked about in-vehicle devices to monitor teenagers' driving, 37–59% of parents had heard of them. Parents were least interested in using video cameras and about equally interested in computer chips and cell-phone-based GPS systems. Disinterest in monitoring devices most often was attributed to trusting teenagers or respecting their privacy. **Conclusions:** Licensing laws influence ages of initiating driving. Although many parents support licensing at 17 or older — higher than in all but one state — most teenagers initiate driving soon after reaching the minimum age. Parents plan to supervise teenagers' driving, and many say they are open to using in-vehicle monitoring devices. **Impact on Industry:** Many parents support a minimum licensing age of 17 or older and would consider in-vehicle devices to extend their supervision of teenager's driving.

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**Keywords:** Teenage drivers; Novice drivers; Age of licensure; Parents of teenage drivers; Learner's permits; Driver's licenses; Graduated driver licensing

## 1. Introduction

In 2005, 4,459 people ages 16–19 died in motor-vehicle crashes in the United States. Crash injuries are by far the leading cause of death for this age group. In 2004, the latest year for which data are available, 38% of deaths among 16–19 year-olds from all causes were related to motor-vehicle crashes (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, 2004).

Whether based on population or miles driven, teenage drivers have high rates of both fatal and nonfatal crashes compared with older drivers. The crash risk is particularly high during the first months following licensure (Mayhew, Simpson, & Pak, 2003; McCartt, Shabanova, & Leaf, 2003).

For most of the 20th century, most U.S. states allowed teenagers to get full-privilege licenses at earlier ages than in most other countries, and little driving experience typically was required prior to licensure. Beginning with Florida in 1996, most states have implemented graduated licensing systems that phase in full driving privileges. Following a supervised learner stage, an intermediate phase limits unsupervised driving in high-risk settings (e.g., driving at

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 703 247 1500; fax: +1 702 247 1678.

E-mail address: amccartt@ihs.org (A.T. McCartt).

night or with teenage passengers). The phase-in process takes time, so young drivers are not only more experienced but also somewhat older and more mature when they earn full privileges. As of May 2007, most states have established learner's permit holding periods of 6 months or longer and require parents to certify at least 30 hours of practice driving. Most states also have instituted nighttime driving restrictions and teenage passenger restrictions for new drivers. In states where graduated licensing laws have been adopted, crashes among 16 year-olds have been reduced by 10–30% (Fohr, Layde, & Guse, 2005; Foss, Feaganes, & Rodgman, 2001; Governor's Highway Safety Office, 2001; Shope & Molnar, 2004; Ulmer, Preusser, Williams, Ferguson, & Farmer, 2000; Zwicker, Williams, Chaudhary, & Farmer, 2006).

Crash reductions among 16-year-old drivers generally have been larger in states where graduated licensing programs have resulted in delays in licensure. Several elements of a licensing system may affect the age at which teenagers become licensed, including the minimum age for obtaining a learner's permit, the minimum permit holding period, and other licensing requirements such as a minimum amount of practice driving. The most direct way to delay licensure is through an older minimum licensing age. As of May 2007, only New Jersey licenses at age 17; 43 states and the District of Columbia license during the 16th year, 5 states license during the 15th year, and 1 state licenses at 14 years, 3 months. Studies of New Jersey's 17-year-old licensing age, conducted prior to graduated licensing, found that crashes among 16-year-old drivers in New Jersey (who were in the learner stage) were the lowest among 5 states, and lifestyle effects of the higher licensing age were minimal (Ferguson, Leaf, Williams, & Preusser, 1996; Preusser, Leaf, Ferguson, & Williams, 2000). Several state legislatures recently have considered raising the licensing age to 17, but none have enacted a change.

Despite the beneficial effects of graduated licensing systems, teenage crash rates remain high and additional interventions are sought. Parents are the chief enforcers of graduated licensing rules and have primary responsibility for managing their teenagers' driving in other respects. Parents surveyed recently in Connecticut said they were aware of teenage driving risks and planned to be active participants in the licensing process (Williams, Leaf, Simons-Morton, & Hartos, 2006). Other research has focused on how parents can provide comprehensive learning experiences, enforce states' licensing rules, and create their own (Simons-Morton & Ouimet, 2006). New in-vehicle technologies are being developed to aid parents in supervising their teenagers' driving by providing feedback to parents and/or teenagers on teenagers' risky driving behaviors (e.g., speeding, hard braking). Researchers are beginning to assess the effects of such technologies on teenagers' driving (McGehee, Raby, Carney, Lee, & Reyes, 2007).

The present study expands on earlier research by focusing on two areas of parental decision making regarding teenagers' driving: the timing of obtaining learner's permits and driver's licenses and monitoring teenagers' driving after licensure, including interest in in-vehicle monitoring technologies.

## 2. Method

Parents of 16 and 17 year-olds were interviewed between February and May 2006 at driver licensing offices while their teenagers took their first on-road driving tests to obtain their licenses. Three study states were selected among those with a diversity of graduated licensing programs and with licensing ages of 16 or older. It also was necessary for states to permit recruitment of parents at licensing offices. To obtain a representative sample of parents within each state at the driver licensing offices, states needed to administer all road tests at driver licensing offices and require teenagers to be accompanied by adults. Based on these criteria, three states were selected: Minnesota, North Carolina, and Rhode Island. Table 1 summarizes the driver licensing systems in the three states during the study period.

At least three licensing offices in each state were selected that administered enough road tests to conduct 300 interviews

Table 1  
Provisions of states' driver licensing laws during study period, February–May 2006

	Minnesota	North Carolina	Rhode Island
<i>First stage of licensure</i>			
Entry age	Learner's permit at 15	Learner's permit at 15	Learner's permit at 16
Driver education	Completion of 30-hour classroom course and enrollment in on-road course; typical cost \$50–400	Completion of state-funded driver education, including 30-hour class and 6-hour on-road training	Completion of 33-hour class costing \$75
Minimum holding period	6 months	1 year	6 months
Time valid	2 years	18 months	1 year or age 18, whichever comes first
Minimum supervised driving	30 (10 at night)	None	50 (10 at night)
<i>Second stage of licensure</i>			
Minimum age	Full license at 16*	Intermediate license at 16	Intermediate license at 16, 6 months
Driver education	Completed	—	—
Driving test	Required	Required	Required
Nighttime restriction	None	9 pm to 5 am for first 6 months	1 am to 5 am for 1 year or age 18, whichever comes first
Passenger restriction	None	No more than 1 passenger younger than 21 for first 6 months	No more than 1 passenger younger than 21 for first year or age 18, whichever comes first

\*A "full license" is defined as having no passenger or nighttime driving restriction.

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