



Views of New Jersey teenagers about their state's policies for beginning drivers



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 July 2013

Received in revised form 7 September 2013

Accepted 8 October 2013

Available online 29 October 2013

Keywords:

Teenage drivers

Graduated driver licensing

Licensure

License decals

Teenage licensing laws

ABSTRACT

Background: Three New Jersey licensing policies are unique in the United States: (a) minimum licensing age of 17; (b) applying full graduated driver licensing (GDL) rules to beginners younger than 21; and (c) requiring license status decals on vehicle plates of drivers in GDL. **Methods:** New Jersey 17–19 year-olds were surveyed by telephone and online. **Results:** Eighty-four percent approved licensing at 17; 77% approved applying GDL to older novices; 23% approved the decal policy. Probationary licensees ages 18–19 were more likely than 17 year-olds to have multiple nighttime restriction violations in the past month. There were no age group differences in passenger restriction violations. **Discussion:** All three policies have been considered in other states. Views of teenagers directly affected by the policies can be taken into account in considering their implementation. **Practical applications:** Views of licensing policies by affected teenagers indicate potential support or obstacles to their adoption in other states.

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1. Introduction

New Jersey's licensing system has several unique features that distinguish it from the other 49 U.S. states and the District of Columbia. These features include a minimum licensing age of 17, applying full graduated driver licensing (GDL) rules to older novices, and requiring license plate decals for teenagers with learner's permits or probationary licenses.

1.1 Minimum licensing age of 17

Licensing ages were established early in the 20th century, and historical records documenting the rationale for different choices are scarce (Mayhew, Fields, & Simpson, 2000). In 1995, prior to the widespread introduction of GDL, 40 states and the District of Columbia licensed at 16, New Jersey at 17, Massachusetts allowed licensure at 16 years, 6 months, Indiana at 16 years, 1 month, six states at age 15, and one at 14 (Williams, Weinberg, Fields, & Ferguson, 1996). These initial licenses, available upon passing a driving test, allowed full driving privileges in most states. Learner permits were available at ages ranging from 14 to 16; the minimum permit age in New Jersey was 16. The benefits of New Jersey's higher licensing age, in terms of both fatal and non-fatal injury crash reductions, have been well established (Ferguson, Leaf, Williams, & Preusser, 1996; Williams, Karpf, & Zador, 1983).

When minimum learner holding periods were extended in many GDL systems, minimum licensing ages became higher than 16 in a few states, generally 16 1/2. In other words, the combination of a minimum

learner age of 16 and a required 6-month holding period raised the licensing age from 16 to 16 1/2, and the initial license generally included night and/or passenger restrictions for a period of time prior to full licensure. A national evaluation of GDL found that the longer the licensing age was delayed, the lower the fatal crash rate. For example, a 6-month delay (e.g., from 16 to 16 1/2) was associated with a 7% lower fatal crash rate; a delay of 1 year (e.g., from 16 to 17) lowered it by 13% (McCartt, Teoh, Fields, Braitman, & Hellinga, 2010). A national analysis of insurance collision claims found that a 6-month delay in the licensing age was associated with a 5% reduction in the claim rate of 16-year-old drivers (Trempe, 2009).

1.2 Applying full GDL to older novices

When New Jersey adopted a GDL system in January 2001 (2001 NJ Laws, Chap. 420, amending NJ Stat. Ann., sec. 39:3–13.1 ff.), another unique feature was introduced. In almost all other U.S. jurisdictions, GDL does not apply to those who are 18 or older. If a person is still under GDL rules when they turn 18, they automatically graduate to full licensure. If they do not start until age 18 or later, they bypass their state's GDL requirements. Maine and Maryland apply partial GDL rules to some novices 18 or older. In Maryland, license applicants younger than 25 must hold a learner's permit for 9 months, and those 25 and older have to hold a permit for 45 days (MD Code [TRANS.], sec. 16–105). Night and passenger restrictions apply only to those younger than 18 (MD Code [TRANS.], sec. 16–113). In Maine, night and passenger restrictions also apply only to those younger than 18, but the 6-month learner period and a requirement of 35 h of practice driving during the permit period (Maine Revised Statutes sec. 1304 (1) (H)) extend to novices younger than 21. However, New Jersey

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applies full GDL rules to novices ages 18, 19, and 20 (6-month learner period, followed by a probationary license with night and passenger restrictions). New Jersey's nighttime restriction for the probationary license is from 11 p.m. to 5 a.m.; parents, dependents, and one additional person are allowed as passengers. The probationary license has to be held for 1 year, so 18 year-olds who did not get their license right away after turning 17 still will be subject to night and passenger restrictions at age 18, and an 18-year-old seeking licensure would be subject to the full GDL requirements. It is possible that some teenagers in other states turn 18 before fulfilling all GDL requirements, but younger licensing ages than in New Jersey make it easier to qualify for a full license prior to 18. An evaluation of New Jersey's GDL system found substantial crash reductions at age 17, and smaller reductions at age 18 (Williams, Chaudhary, Tefft, & Tison, 2010).

In the other countries with GDL systems — Australia, Canada, and New Zealand — older novices are subject to GDL policies, and this is the case in all jurisdictions within Australia and Canada. In Canada, full GDL policies apply to novices of all ages. In New Zealand and in some Australian states, policies are modified for older novices, generally at about age 25. New Jersey modifies its policies for novices 21 and older, with a minimum learner requirement of 3 months (rather than 6) and no nighttime or passenger requirements.

When Canadian provinces were setting GDL rules, licensing agencies were not allowed to discriminate on the basis of age, and it also was recognized that there was an increasing number of older people seeking licensure in Canada (Mayhew & Simpson, 1990). The scientific basis for the policy is that novices of all ages have elevated crash risk because of their inexperience, and GDL is designed to deal with driver inexperience, not age per se (Mayhew & Simpson, 1990). The crash risk of older novices is not as high as that of young novices, but it is higher than that of same-age experienced drivers (Maycock, Lockwood, & Lester, 1991; Mayhew & Simpson, 1990; McCartt, Mayhew, Braitman, Ferguson, & Simpson, 2009).

The issue of whether GDL requirements should be applied to novice drivers 18 and older in the United States is receiving increased attention currently. In a recent survey of state initiatives conducted by the Governors Highway Safety Association (2012), it was indicated that "many states are wrestling with whether it makes more sense to strengthen their existing GDL provisions which apply only to new drivers younger than 18 or try to increase GDL requirements so that they include older teens" (p. 16). Increased interest in applying GDL to older beginners has been spurred by the belief that the population of older novices is growing, in part because today's youth can connect electronically and thus have less interest in early licensing (Sivak & Schoettle, 2012). Some research has reported increases in per capita fatal crash rates at ages 18 and 19 associated with strong GDL programs (Males, 2007; Masten, Foss, & Marshall, 2011). Masten et al. (2011) speculated that the higher crash risk may be because teenagers are delaying licensure to avoid GDL restrictions.

However, these are not settled issues. Other research found that stronger GDL programs did not significantly affect the fatal crash rates for 18–19 year-olds (McCartt et al., 2010), but were associated with lower collision claim rates for older teenagers (Trempe, 2009). There also are studies reporting an association between GDL and reductions in fatal crashes at age 18 and older (Morrisey & Grabowski, 2010). Even prior to GDL, some teenagers waited to obtain a license (Williams, Lund, & Preusser, 1985), and national licensure data are inadequate for tracking changes in delay patterns (Foss, 2013; Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2006). Recent surveys have indicated that economic costs and other practical considerations, not avoidance of GDL or ability to connect with friends electronically, are the main reasons reported for delaying licensure (Williams, 2011; Williams & Tefft, 2013). Regardless of the reasons, there is considerable license delay in the United States currently. In a national probability survey of 18–20 year-olds conducted in June–July 2012, 28% had not obtained a learner's permit prior to their 18th birthday (Williams & Tefft, 2013).

1.3 License plate decals

A third policy unique to New Jersey is the requirement that went into effect in May 2010 that drivers in the GDL system must affix red reflective decals identifying their license status to front and rear license plates (2009 NJ Laws, Ch. 37, amending NJ Stat. Ann., sec. 39:3–13). The primary purpose is to make it easier for police to enforce driving restrictions. Although the law doesn't specifically state that the decal applies only to provisional license holders younger than 21, that was the intent and that is how the New Jersey authorities are interpreting it. License plate identifier requirements exist in other jurisdictions, including Australia and some Canadian provinces. New Jersey is the only U.S. state to have this policy, although other states have considered it.

The policy has been highly controversial in New Jersey, and existing evidence for its effects is inconsistent. A survey undertaken soon after the law was enacted found that a large majority of teenagers and parents disapproved of it, and observations at schools indicated that compliance generally was low (McCartt, Oesch, Williams, & Powell, 2013). Disapproval was primarily related to concerns about the identification and potential targeting of teenage drivers. Teenagers' reported compliance with teenage driving restrictions was either lower or essentially unchanged after the decal requirement was implemented, compared with shortly before. However, another study found that a 9% reduction in crashes of teenagers with probationary licenses was associated with the law in its first year (Curry, Pfeiffer, Localio, & Durbin, 2013).

1.4 Objectives of the current study

In the present survey, views of 17–19 year-olds in New Jersey were obtained on all three of these policies. Because other states are examining the issue of applying GDL to older novices, the views of those subject to this policy are of interest and have not been obtained before. The survey also provided the opportunity to ask about compliance with New Jersey's night and passenger restrictions for probationary license holders. It has been speculated that older novices may be less likely than younger novices to comply with night and passenger restrictions, and the survey allowed a check on that possibility. Similarly, the views of New Jersey teenagers about the long-standing 17-year-old licensing age are unknown. The present survey also made it possible to see if views and practices regarding decals have changed now that the law has been in effect for a longer period of time.

2. Methods

Telephone interviews and online surveys with New Jersey residents ages 17–19 were conducted between mid-December 2012 and late-January 2013 by Opinion America Group, LLC (Cedar Knolls, NJ), a professional survey organization. This time of the year facilitated reaching college students who were at home for the semester break.

A total of 736 surveys were completed via telephone between December 17 and January 26. A random targeted sample of New Jersey households that had high probability of having a teenager was obtained from a provider of market research samples. The starting random pool of household telephone numbers was 27,642, and included both landline and cellphone numbers. From this initial sample, 8295 were reached. Quotas were used to ensure approximately equal samples of 17, 18, and 19 year-olds and approximately equal numbers of females and males within each age group. The cooperation rate (American Association for Public Opinion Research, 2011) was 8.9%, resulting in 736 respondents. Those not participating included 5103 who agreed to participate but did not meet the age or New Jersey residence criteria or were excluded because of the age and gender quotas, and 2456 who declined to participate or began but did not finish the survey. Once potential respondents who met all the study criteria were identified and began the survey, full surveys were completed by 97%.

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