

INTRODUCTION

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In every motorized society, young drivers stand out as a problem group. The reasons for their overinvolvement in motor vehicle crashes are well understood — they are primarily a result of the combination of immaturity and inexperience. In the United States, the seriousness of the young driver problem has been acknowledged for decades, yet surprisingly little has been done that has been effective in reducing the problem. Traditional approaches include education and training programs to teach young people how to drive, and special penalty systems to deal with those who incur traffic citations or get into crashes. Both of these approaches have serious limitations in reducing the young driver problem.

Licensing policies have important potential for moderating the young driver problem. All youthful drivers must go through the licensing process, which can be designed to ensure that a certain level of competence has been reached before full, unsupervised driving privileges are allowed. There is great variation in licensing policies both in the United States and around the world, and some policies have been shown to be much more effective than others at reducing the problem.

Graduated licensing is one such policy for dealing with beginning drivers and is currently a subject of intense interest in the United States. Under graduated licensing, full driving privileges are phased in, with the beginner encouraged to accumulate on-the-road driving experience outside of high risk situations. Graduated licensing is not a new concept; it has been discussed in the United States since the early 1970s. However, the world's first bona fide graduated licensing system was introduced in New Zealand in 1987. In the 1990s graduated licensing systems have been adopted in some Canadian provinces, and many states in the United States are considering such systems.

Nearly all the major highway safety organizations in the United States have endorsed graduated licensing, and it appears to be an idea whose time has come. Yet, there are some questions and confusion about graduated licensing in terms of what it really is, what distinguishes it from other licensing systems that involve restrictions, and what the essential elements of graduated licensing are. There are also questions about the acceptability of graduated licensing, inasmuch as it introduces limitations on mobility.

Thus, the publication of the proceedings of the TRB workshop on graduated licensing comes at a propitious time. The papers prepared for this workshop address these issues and others, as well as tracing the early experience of Canadian provinces with graduated licensing. It is intended that these proceedings serve as a sourcebook to states that are or will be considering adoption of graduated licensing systems.

The papers, in the order in which they appear in this report:

1. Introduce an overview of the young driver problem (Williams), emphasizing the exaggerated crash risk of 16-year-olds (three times higher than that of 18-19 year-olds) and crash features—speeding, high nighttime risk, low seat belt use, other young people in the car — that can assist in identifying ways to deal with this problem.

2. Identify the elements of graduated licensing and the functions they are expected to serve: reducing exposure, improving proficiency, or enhancing motivation (McKnight).

3. Review the types of licensing systems used throughout the world and the distinctions among them, an outline of a model graduated licensing system, and a description of New Zealand's system (Mayhew).

4. Review and assess current licensing policies in the United States: learners permit periods (Ferguson) and initial licenses (Preusser). Generally, the path to full driving privileges is quick and relatively easy. In the few states that have restrictions typical of graduated licensing, such as night driving curfews for beginning license holders, the motor vehicle injury problem is lessened.

5. Review the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's efforts to encourage states to adopt graduated licensing, first in the 1970s and now again in the 1990s (Hedlund and Miller).

6. Describe the early experience in Ontario and Nova Scotia, where graduated licensing systems went into effect in 1994 (Walker; Vance).

7. Assess how driver education and graduated licensing might best fit together (Lonero) and discuss the pros and cons of graduated licensing (Foss), including consideration of factors related to its political viability.