

HOW WE LICENSE IN THE UNITED STATES — PATHS TO LICENSURE

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The concept of graduated licensing is grounded in the knowledge that learning to drive is a long-term undertaking, the complexities of which cannot be learned overnight. It is well established that many beginning drivers, particularly young drivers, have neither the skill nor the maturity to handle driving under the more hazardous conditions, such as driving at night and driving with teenage passengers in the car (Williams et al., 1995a, Williams and Wells, 1995). Thus it makes no sense to bestow on a beginning driver a full-privilege license to drive under all conditions. Graduated licensing systems, which are already used in Australia, New Zealand, and Canada, phase in full licensing privileges for the new driver with a progression from lower to higher risk driving situations as driving experience is gained. In a graduated licensing system, the driver progresses through an initial learner's period of several months in which driving is supervised, a restricted license stage in which unsupervised driving may be allowed under some circumstances and not others, and finally an unrestricted license that is granted only if the driver remains free of crashes and violations during the restricted stage.

Given the heightened interest in the United States in graduated licensing systems for young, beginning drivers, a first step is to look at the licensing requirements that are currently in place and how these practices differ from a typical graduated licensing system. In most states, newly licensed drivers have few restrictions governing where, when, and with whom they can drive; thus, the learning period prior to licensing becomes particularly important.

LICENSING REGULATIONS IN THE UNITED STATES

Unlike many countries around the world, in the United States licensure is typically allowed at 16 years, compared with 17 or 18 elsewhere, although some states allow licensure even earlier. Not only does the age at which licensure is allowed vary, but the path to licensure also varies substantially from state to state.

To document state licensing requirements, the relevant portions of the licensing sections of the motor vehicle codes for the 50 states and the District of Columbia were reviewed and data were collected on the

requirements for learner's permits and driver's licenses (Williams et al., 1995b). Representatives of the motor vehicle departments in each state were interviewed to confirm information contained in the laws and to discover other relevant information not available from the statutes. Each state's driver manual was also reviewed. Of particular interest were whether a learner's permit is required prior to licensure and if the permit is required, whether it had to be held for a minimum period before applying for a license, and if so for how long. Also of interest were the prerequisites for obtaining a permit, the earliest age at which a permit could be obtained, and the term for which the permit is valid. Prerequisites for licensure and the earliest age at which a license could be obtained were also noted. The following discussion is based on state requirements as they apply to the minimum age at which a learner's permit can be obtained.

In all states teenagers can obtain licenses before age 18, but parental permission is required. Without parental permission the minimum licensing age is 18. New Jersey is the only state that delays licensing until age 17. Massachusetts allows licensure at age 16 years, 6 months, and Indiana at 16 years, 1 month. But the majority of states license at age 16 (40 states and the District of Columbia), and six states allow licensure at age 15, one at age 14.

All states administer vision and written tests as a prerequisite to obtaining a driver's license, and all states require that prelicensure driving be supervised. However, states differ in who they allow to supervise. For the most part learning drivers must be accompanied by someone older than the learner, but there are six jurisdictions (Arizona, Hawaii, Kentucky, Ohio, New Mexico, and Washington, D.C.) in which any licensed driver is allowed to supervise and this could include another 16 year-old driver. At the minimum permit age, nine states require that a learner be accompanied by a parent or guardian. Other states specify the age of the supervisor and/or the number of years of licensure, for example, any driver age 18 or older, with one year experience.

Most states require a learner's permit in order to drive legally before licensure. Connecticut and New Hampshire do not issue learner's permits but allow any young person who has attained a specified age to drive if they are accompanied by a parent or guardian.

Although learner's permits are available in other states, some do not require that a learner's permit be obtained prior to licensure. Thirty jurisdictions require a permit prior to licensure, but in 19 jurisdictions, upon reaching the minimum licensing age, young people can obtain a driver's license without having ever had a permit to drive. Of the 30 states that require permits prior to licensure, 11 require that they be held for a minimum period, ranging from 14 to 90 days before the person can apply for a license.

The minimum age at which a permit can be obtained also varies. Among the states that license at age 16, the minimum learner's permit age is 14 in 5 states, 15 in 19 states, 15 years 6 months in 5 states, 15 years 9 months in 2 states and 16 years in 6 states and the District of Columbia. The remaining states allow a permit at 15 years 3 months, 15 years 7 months, and 15 years 10 months.

The period between the age at which a permit can be obtained and the minimum licensing age may be important because there is evidence that these relationships can affect the time spent in the learner's stage and the age at which a license is obtained (Ferguson et al., 1995; Ferguson and Williams, 1995). As shown in Table 1, there are 13 states in which the minimum learner's permit age is the same as the minimum licensing age, four in which the period is less than six months, seven states with a period of six months exactly, and one state where the period is between 6 and 12 months. Another twenty states set the permit age at one year younger than the licensing age, and in six states the period is more than one year. If drivers can obtain a permit to drive well before the minimum licensing age more time can be spent in the learner's stage. And if this period is used by parents to provide supervised practice driving, longer permit periods should result in beginner drivers with more driving experience (Ferguson and Williams, 1995).

Data were collected as part of a national survey of parents of 17 year-olds. Parents were asked, among other things, the age at which their 17 year-old child obtained their learner's permit and their driver's license. These data were analyzed for 16 year-old licensure states and grouped according to the minimum age at which the permit could be obtained, for example, whether permits could be obtained at the same age or at a younger age than the minimum licensing age (see Table 2). For states in which the permit could not be obtained until age 16, the average holding period was only about four months. This compares with a six month holding period for states which allow a learner's permit at 15 years, 6 months, and an 11 month holding period for states that allowed a permit to be obtained a year or

more prior to licensure. However, there is a trade-off, because in states that allow an earlier period of supervised driving, teenagers typically obtained their licenses earlier. There is also concern that with more opportunity for driving prior to licensure, teenagers, who may feel more confident in their driving skills will be more likely to drive illegally during the learner's stage. In Virginia, a 16 year-old licensure state, the minimum learner's permit age was recently reduced from 15 years, 8 months to 15 years. For teenagers who obtain their license close to their 16th birthday, this would allow at least a year of supervised driving compared with a four month period previously. It will be interesting to see how this affects permit holding periods and age of licensure.

States also vary in their regulations governing the period for which a permit is valid, ranging from 60 days to indefinite. Five jurisdictions have permit terms of three months or less and in 27 states permits are valid for one year or more. States with very short permit periods or where permits expire shortly after the minimum licensing age may hasten the progression to licensure because, although permits can be renewed, this often involves a trip to the licensing agency and/or a fee. In Delaware, for example, a 16 year-old licensure state, the minimum permit age of 15 years 10 months, combined with a two-month permit period, results in nearly half of the young people obtaining their license within the first month after turning 16 (Ferguson et al., 1995).

CONCLUSIONS

The graduated licensing systems that are currently in place in New Zealand, Australia, and Canada all stipulate a minimum period of supervised driving ranging from 6 months in Nova Scotia (3 months with driver education) to 12 months in Victoria. By comparison, in the United States, only 11 states have a minimum required permit period, only 3 of which last for 90 days. In fact, 19 states do not require a learner's permit, and 14 states require no permit, no driver education, and have virtually no prerequisites to getting a driver's license other than a vision and a written test.

In Ontario and Nova Scotia, Canada, as well as Victoria, Australia, it is not possible to get a learner's permit until age 16 years, and permits must be held anywhere from 3 months with driver's education in Nova Scotia to 12 months in Victoria (but drivers must be age 18 in order to get a license). In the United States, the only state that does not allow a permit until age 16 years, and has a required holding period, albeit

TABLE 1 RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MINIMUM PERMIT AGE AND MINIMUM LICENSING AGE

Permit Age	Number of States
Same as licensing age	13*
1-6 months prior to licensing age	11
6-12 months prior to licensing age	1
1 year prior to licensing age	20
More than 1 year prior to licensing age	6

TABLE 2 AVERAGE AGE WHEN PERMIT AND LICENSES WERE OBTAINED IN 16-YEAR-OLD LICENSURE STATES WITH VARYING MINIMUM PERMIT AGES

License age/Permit age	Average Permit Age	Average License Age	Permit Duration
16/16	16 years 1 month	16 years 5 months	4 months
16/15 years 6 months	15 years 8 months	16 years 2 months	6 months
16/15 years or younger	15 years 3 months	16 years 2 months	11 months

of only 30 days, is Kentucky. However, in this state any licensed driver may accompany the learner.

Although this analysis indicates that many states allow a quick and easy route through the learning phase, this does not necessarily mean that in these states beginning drivers have little or no experience prior to licensure. Except in the two states that have no learner's permits, learner's permits are available and are required for prelicensure driving to be done. Basically, states leave it up to parents to regulate their children's driving and there is evidence that many do require more than the state does. In a recent survey (Ferguson and Williams, 1995) parents reported that more than 90 percent of their licensed 17-year-olds had obtained a learner's permit and the average permit duration was 8 months. Parents were overwhelmingly in favor of a minimum period of supervised driving, with 79 percent preferring a period of at least 3 months; 60 percent preferred a period of at least 6 months. Most parents reported that they place their own restrictions on

where, when and with whom their teenagers could driver when first licensed, and many would like licensing to be more difficult in their own state.

The goal of the learner's phase is to provide beginning drivers with supervised experience prior to letting them drive on the road alone. Presumably, the longer the permit term, the more opportunity there will be to accrue the necessary skills. Of course, merely holding a permit for a long period of time does not guarantee that a lot of time is actually spent driving. Neither does it mean that in states where permits are actually held for a longer period that more supervised driving is actually taking place. Clearly, more research is needed to understand what factors contribute to the amount of supervised driving a beginning driver actually accumulates, for example, the rules of parental involvement or socioeconomic status and the relationship of actual practice time and state law requirements.

There are a few relatively easy ways in which the learner's permit phase could be changed to allow more

supervised driving and to bring the prelicensure requirements more in line with graduated licensing systems. States could increase the term for which a permit is valid. A permit that is valid for a short period may encourage learning drivers to trade a permit in for a license earlier than they otherwise would. A minimum period of supervised driving prior to licensure, preferably a period of at least 3 months should also be mandatory. Reducing the age at which permits can be obtained, while permitting a longer learning period, may lead to earlier licensure than currently is the case. Research is needed to disentangle the relationship between these factors. It may be that the best solution is for states to mandate a minimum period of supervised driving not to start before age 16, as is currently the case in Ontario, Canada and Victoria, Australia.

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