

INITIAL LICENSES FOR YOUNG DRIVERS

David F. Preusser
Preusser Research Group, Inc.

Teenagers have higher per mile crash rates than older drivers. They have much higher crash rates at night (Williams, 1985). These high crash rates for teenagers have been shown to be associated with both young age, or perhaps immaturity, and lack of driving experience (see e.g., Mayhew and Simpson, 1990).

Graduated licensing may provide an opportunity to deal with both the young age and lack of experience issues. It can accomplish these goals by delaying full privilege, drive anywhere drive anytime, licensure until the young person is somewhat older. And, during the delay, it can allow for extended supervised practice driving and unsupervised driving during the less hazardous daylight hours. There may also be additional opportunities for post-licensing control within a total Graduated Licensing system.

The process of integrating a young person into the traffic stream can typically be segmented into four critical time periods which begin with the following four critical events: first drive on a public road (typically one year before the state's minimum age for a learners permit; Ferguson et al., 1994); obtain a learners permit and/or enroll in drivers education; obtain a license; and gain access to one's own car. The mileage driven by young persons, and thus the highway risk they incur, increases exponentially with each of these events (Williams et al., 1985a). The present paper will focus on the middle of this sequence. That is, getting a license and the initial period of having a license.

GETTING A LICENSE

Most young people want to become licensed as soon as they possibly can (Preusser, 1988). Licensing is seen as a goal. Individual teenagers achieve this goal at different rates depending on who they are, their family backgrounds and the state in which they live.

Comparisons between teenagers living in the same state, and thus subject to the same licensing law, indicate that licensure at a younger age is more common among those teenagers from two parent family units, greater parental educational level, fewer siblings and higher school grades (Preusser, 1988; Ferguson et al., 1994). Such characteristics describe teenagers who are "advantaged." They use these advantages to achieve licensure at a younger age.

Comparisons between teenagers living in different states indicate that the rate at which teenagers become licensed is greatly influenced by state licensing law. One important element of state law is the age at which a learners permit may be obtained. Younger permit ages promote early learning leading to early licensure. A second important element is the length of time for which the permit is valid. Permits that expire quickly, say within a few months, may create a sense of urgency to learn how to drive and become licensed before the permit expires. Alternatively, permits that are valid for a year or more do not create this urgency. A third element is the age at which a license may be obtained. Obviously, a state which licenses fifteen year olds will have younger teens licensed whereas a state which does not license until age seventeen will have substantial delays in teenage licensure (Williams et al., 1985b).

While based on less evidence, the fourth element in state law which appears to affect the age at which teens become licensed is the attractiveness of the license that can be obtained. Full privilege licenses are very attractive and well worth pursuing. Restricted licenses are less valuable. The primary license restriction that can be found in the United States is a driving curfew which affects recreational driving, but not driving to or from work or school, at night. The state with the strongest night curfew, 9pm to 5am, is New York. There is substantial evidence from New York and elsewhere that night curfews reduce crash involvements during the curfew hours (Preusser et al., 1984; 1990; 1993; Ferguson et al., in press). There is also evidence that the New York curfew, and possibly the curfews in Pennsylvania and Louisiana, have the added effect of delaying teen licensure (Preusser et al., 1984; Preusser, 1988; Ferguson et al., 1994). In fact, in New York, the evidence suggests that the overall or general crash reduction effect of delayed licensure exceeds the specific effect of crash reduction during the affected curfew hours.

Recently, high school students were surveyed in Delaware and upstate New York (Ferguson et al., 1994; upstate is north of New York City). Delaware learners permits, which expire in two months, are issued beginning at age 15 years, 10 months. New York learners permits, which are valid for one year, are not issued until age 16. Both states issue licenses to sixteen year olds but only New York has a night driving curfew.

The results indicated that the average Delaware student "first drove on a public road" at age 14 years, 10 months which was six months earlier than the New York average of 15 years, 4 months. Similarly, the Delaware students typically obtained their learners permits two months earlier than in New York (16 years, 0 months versus 16 years, 2 months) and their licenses four months earlier (16 years, 3 months versus 16 years, 7 months).

In another study (Leaf et al., 1994) teen crash rates were compared between Delaware and Connecticut, two states without night driving curfews, versus upstate New York and Pennsylvania, two states with night driving curfews that apply to 16 year olds and some 17 year olds. The results indicated lower crash rates in Pennsylvania with a midnight to 5 am curfew and much lower crash rates in New York with a 9 pm to 5 am curfew. These differences were partly due to crash reductions during the affected curfew hours and partly due to crash reductions during all other hours of the day. Both the New York and the Pennsylvania curfews are designed to limit unsupervised night "recreational" driving. Neither curfew applies when driving to or from work or school or when accompanied by a parent.

Fatal crash rates for drivers ages 16 and younger vary substantially across states. On average, states with the lowest crash rates do not allow learning driving until age 16 with licensing at ages 16 to 17 (Preusser, 1995).

HAVING A LICENSE

Currently in the U.S., licenses are available to seventeen year olds (New Jersey plus New York City and Long Island), sixteen year olds (43 states including: the District of Columbia; Massachusetts at 16 years, 6 months; and Indiana at 16 years, 1 month), fifteen year olds (6 states) and fourteen year olds (South Dakota). In the majority of states, these young driver licenses are subject to restrictions, controls or monitoring which exceed the conditions for adult drivers and/or experienced drivers.

It is felt that the most notable restriction is the night driving curfew discussed above. Currently, some form of night driving restriction can be found in nine states (IIHS, 1995). These restrictions variously affect drivers ages 14 through 17.

Another restriction, receiving much current interest, is lower allowable blood alcohol levels for young drivers. Often referred to as Zero Tolerance, some form of lower young driver alcohol limit may be found in 34 states (NHTSA, 1995). These lower alcohol limits have been shown to be effective in reducing young driver alcohol related crashes (Hingson et al., in press).

Several states have laws and regulations dealing with license control and monitoring. The most familiar of these is license suspension following a drug and/or alcohol conviction which, except in Massachusetts, need not be transportation related. Such laws, referred to as Use and Lose, may be found in some form in 32 states (NHTSA, 1991). Similarly, 20 states have established special penalties for impaired driving convictions of youthful offenders (NHTSA, 1991). Also, there are eleven states that specifically allow for driver improvement actions to be taken against young drivers, "provisional" drivers and/or new drivers based on fewer "points" on the drivers license (NHTSA, 1994). Such actions may include license suspension.

Many of these post-license restrictions and controls are based on age. That is, when a driver reaches a certain age the curfew is lifted, or the lower blood alcohol limit does not apply, or the special penalties for an impaired driving conviction are no longer available. Some are based on time. For instance, a driver may move from a "provisional" license to a regular license following one, two or three years with a good driving record. There is also precedence for lifting a restriction following the completion of some education requirement. For instance, the night driving curfew in New York and Pennsylvania is lifted for those seventeen year olds who have completed drivers education.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Young driver licensing law has undergone surprisingly little change in the United States during the last 30 years despite the large body of evidence documenting the extent and characteristics of the young driver crash problem. The current emphasis on Graduated Licensing offers an opportunity to incorporate much of what we have learned into these newly developing systems each of which must deal effectively with the problem of young age and lack of driving experience.

It is felt that "young age" is an issue primarily when a teenage driver is engaged in recreational types of activities. Young age appears to be less of an issue in learning driving situations or when engaged in a purposeful driving activity (Preusser, 1995). It is felt that the young age issue can best be solved by limiting "recreational" driving until the young person is somewhat older. In effect, this means delaying the time at which a young person will obtain a full privilege, drive anywhere drive anytime, license.

Delayed full privilege licensure can be achieved by delaying the time when learning driving can begin. And,

once begun, the learning period should be allowed to extend for a long period of time. There would seem to be no rationale for a learners permit that expires in a few months. Rather, the young person should be allowed, and even encouraged, to hold the learners permit for a year, two years, or longer if the young person so desires. Our laws should never create a sense of urgency or a sense of expectancy for immediate licensure.

Delayed full privilege licensure can also be achieved by establishing a night driving curfew. A night curfew for 16 and perhaps 17 year old drivers may encourage some teenagers to remain in the learner status knowing that the license they would obtain at these ages would be curfew restricted. Others may decide to obtain a license and gain driving experience during daylight and while driving to or from work or school at any hour of the day. Either way, the most hazardous night recreational driving would not be allowed. And, young persons would be gaining driving experience either as a learning driver or as a "daylight" licensed driver.

Graduated licensing systems can address both the young age and driving experience issues. By delaying full privilege licensure, graduated licensing can delay recreational types of driving until the young person is somewhat older. By encouraging supervised practice driving, graduated licensing can begin the process of accumulating driving experience. Then, the young driver can be integrated into the system step by step with increasing age and increasing driving experience.

A complete Graduated Licensing system should also maintain control and monitoring following full privilege licensure. This might include Zero Tolerance for alcohol and, for the first few years of licensure, quicker driver improvement actions based on fewer "points."

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