

AN ASSESSMENT OF GRADUATED DRIVER LICENSING: PROS & CONS

Robert D. Foss

Highway Safety Research Center, University of North Carolina

Inexperienced drivers — especially *young* inexperienced drivers — constitute a very high risk segment of the driving public. They are a threat to the well-being of themselves, their passengers, and other drivers on the road. There is substantial room for reduction of injuries and their associated costs in this sector, probably more than among any other segment of the driving population. In this workshop, we have seen the magnitude of the problem, heard about the reasons that these drivers are at such a high risk of crashing, and learned about the various approaches that have been taken toward this problem during the past fifteen years both in the U.S. and throughout the world.

In consideration of all this information it is useful to take a step back and look at Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) in broader perspective. In particular, I would like to examine not only the positive aspects, which have been both spelled out and implied, but also the drawbacks or shortcomings of GDL. This is not so much to question whether we should pursue graduated licensing, but rather to understand and prepare to face the kinds of questions that inevitably arise when attempts to enact GDL legislation are undertaken.

I will consider the strengths and weaknesses of the GDL approach in the context of four central issues:

- Effectiveness;
- Fairness;
- Public Reaction; and
- Implementation.

EFFECTIVENESS

The advantages of GDL would seem to be self-evident. If it works the lives of many inexperienced drivers, their passengers, and members of the general driving public will be saved. Many thousands of injuries will be prevented. Millions of dollars in resulting societal costs will be averted. The incalculable toll in human suffering will be reduced. But there is that simple caution - if it works. And that is one of the first questions legislators ask. There is, appropriately, little interest in modifying the way a licensing system works, especially through legislation, merely in an effort to see if we might do better.

On the positive side here, we do have some evidence that graduated licensing will indeed work. The careful evaluation of earlier efforts in Maryland and California suggest that some of the elements being promoted as central to GDL do have the desired effect (McKnight et al., 1983; Hagge & Marsh, 1988). The results from a long-term evaluation of a full-blown, genuinely graduated system in New Zealand are even more encouraging (Frith & Perkins, 1992).

Equally as encouraging is the fact that GDL is a sophisticated, integrated approach to addressing the problem it seeks to resolve. It takes into account (whether by design or not) principles of human behavior developed over the years in the social and behavioral sciences as well as the classic principles of injury control elucidated by Bill Haddon, both of which seem all too often to be ignored in highway safety programs. Rather than relying once again on the truism (which is not true) that stiffer punishments are the answer to individual misbehavior (and misadventure), GDL recognizes that human behavior - including driving - is not simply a matter of proper and improper behavior, willfully engaged in. It approaches driving errors by inexperienced drivers as being multiply determined and to some extent unavoidable - resulting from inexperience, poor judgment, impulsiveness, and immaturity. None of these is curable by punishment or threats of punishment.

Instead of placing the burden not to make a mistake (either intentionally or unintentionally) entirely on the shoulders of every individual who begins driving, GDL helps new drivers. It does this by placing inexperienced drivers in the safest possible environment, thereby protecting them from crashes and injuries to the greatest extent possible. Simultaneously, it provides a positive motivation for new drivers to help themselves by requiring appropriate behavior (e.g., no traffic violations) for a specified period of time before allowing unlimited driving privileges.

Rather than simply accepting, or naively denying, that "kids will be kids," GDL attempts to insulate these individuals from the disastrous consequences of what is a natural condition for them. We can't really expect to obtain mature, rational behavior from individuals who by their very nature are immature. It is not a sin to be young, to have some maturing to do, or to make

mistakes. It is certainly wrong to have to die for it. By limiting early driving to the safest of conditions - where both the external and internal driving environments are the safest possible, and with a positive motivation in place for the driver to be careful - GDL puts these people in the best possible learning situation.

Perhaps even better than controlling the environment, GDL is also designed to instill in individuals the habit of exercising caution. This is achieved by requiring that a new driver demonstrate a safe and proper orientation toward driving by not committing traffic violations during their initial driving period. There is potentially a double benefit to this. First, young drivers are motivated to be cautious, safe drivers at the very time when they are the most at risk to themselves and others - during their initial year or two of driving. Even if there is no lasting benefit in terms of reduced crash likelihood during subsequent years of driving, GDL should be of great benefit by encouraging calmer driving among young drivers during the year or two when they are most likely to crash and injure themselves or others.

There is another potential benefit. Having encouraged young drivers to more effectively establish a habit of (more) careful driving, a GDL system stands to produce safety benefits for years to come, rather than merely during the months or years when new drivers are under some driving restrictions. That is, we may find a lasting cohort effect. It is well established that many driving behaviors are habitual. To the extent that GDL is successful in preventing new drivers from developing dangerous habits, those are habits that will not have to be unlearned and which will not result in crashes.

In sum, rather than taking the traditional, ineffective approach of seeing unsafe driving of novice drivers as merely an individual matter to be controlled with threats of punishment, GDL sees the problem as one that can be addressed by employing the reward and positive motivation that behavioral science studies have demonstrated to be effective in modifying human behavior. It treats the problem of crashes, injuries, and resulting costs as a social policy issue rather as simply a matter of irresponsible individual behavior that merits punishment or retribution. Accordingly it addresses the problem by attempting to reduce the resulting crashes by controlling the driving environment as well as the driver.

Despite these very encouraging signs about the potential effectiveness of GDL, it is well to keep in mind that we do not have a particularly strong empirical data base from which to make projections about the likely magnitude of effects. I think we all believe that it will help to reduce crashes. Just how effective it will be

seems to be an open question. Unfortunately, in a number of jurisdictions the GDL systems likely to be enacted probably won't produce any easily measurable beneficial effects. The system in New Zealand is comprehensive and well-integrated. It addresses what would appear to be the most important issues. Yet the demonstrated effects of that program over a long period of time have been modest. An eight percent reduction in crashes is certainly a worthy achievement. However, it is not so large as to suggest that the GDL concept is so robust that any GDL system, no matter how piecemeal or nonsensical it may seem, will produce at least some desired effect. Moreover, it is important to keep in mind that importing traffic safety programs from different cultures without consideration of the implications of cultural differences for their effectiveness is risky (Simpson, 1990). Accordingly, it is extremely important to work toward enactment of genuinely comprehensive GDL systems that are carefully tuned to the particular nature of the novice driver problem in each state, rather than easily accepting 'whatever we can get through the legislature.' Although political realities cannot be ignored, merely enacting a few elements of the GDL approach (e.g., a mandatory supervised driving period and mandatory belt use by passengers of a novice driver), will not likely yield the benefits anticipated from the GDL concept.

Those who have worked with the legislative process know that the GDL systems that will be enacted in some states will make little sense from a social policy viewpoint. Our experience in North Carolina illustrates this, although we are further along on graduated licensing than most other states. As matters currently stand in NC, a form of GDL has passed the Senate and awaits action in the House, where passage is thought to be likely. However, this bill will put in place a system that in essence only mandates (1) a six-month supervised driving period under a learner's permit, (2) accumulating six months violation free driving (but not necessarily six consecutive months), and (3) limitation of passengers to the number of seat belts in a vehicle (which must be worn by all occupants).

To many legislators this structure makes sense. It provides the supervised driving they see as the key to a person learning how to drive and would appear to motivate novice drivers to drive carefully. However, this bill largely misses the point of the GDL concept that the problem is multi-faceted and is best solved with an integrated, scientifically informed approach. It fails to address the point that the real risk of careless, impulsive behavior of young drivers is when they are in the car alone or only with their age peers. That is when they

need the motivation not to take risks. As it currently stands, the NC bill pressures young drivers not to be careless, impulsive, risky drivers only during a period when they must have a parent in the car with them (which serves the same purpose). Nonetheless, should the current bill become law, we may be in a position in NC to have to report that GDL has failed to produce. Not because the concept is unsound, but because its implementation is inadequate. Of course this will then be an opportunity to ask for a stricter version of GDL, but, unfortunately, it might also be the opportunity for opponents of GDL (although there are few such individuals) to maintain that the system has failed and should simply be abandoned.

Some of the concerns that lead legislators to enact (or modify) the particular laws that they do, and these are the 'cons' of GDL, are fairness, constituents' (often anticipated) reactions, and the burden GDL might place on the driver licensing agency.

FAIRNESS

A question that often arises when graduated licensing is suggested concerns whether it is 'fair.' As a program that focuses on new drivers only, rather than all drivers, it is often considered to be discriminatory. This is especially the case when only *young* new drivers are singled out. Despite the very high risk of crashing among this group, when pondering this approach to the problem, individuals inevitably will make the point that not all novices are bad drivers and not all experienced drivers are good drivers. Nonetheless, GDL limits the mobility of an entire group of drivers, not just those known to be most dangerous.

This objection is not necessarily a problem with GDL *per se*, but rather arises from the way most individuals think about social and behavioral phenomena. The human tendency is to think deterministically rather than stochastically. Hence, individual exceptions to a pattern are focused on not as exceptions, but as 'facts' that belie the truth of the matter, and the general pattern is often ignored. Be that as it may, this is the kind of thinking that occurs when GDL is considered and if the label 'unfair' or 'discriminatory' is not quickly and effectively countered, it becomes an easy characterization and a convenient justification for dismissing this approach to the novice driver problem without giving it serious consideration.

Another dimension of this problem with the image of GDL is that it is sometimes perceived as inappropriately punitive. Whereas it is generally considered acceptable to penalize an individual who has transgressed, GDL can be seen as punishment before the

crime. Many individuals do not consider it 'fair' that simply because one is young or inexperienced he or she should not have the same rights as others who are older or more experienced drivers, unless they have done something wrong.

Part of the problem here is that GDL is seen as taking something away from young drivers. That this 'something' is a cultural icon tends to inflame emotions. The rite of passage from childhood to adulthood in the U.S., the unbridled freedom that accompanies a driving license, is seen by many as sacred. This can make it difficult for individuals to listen to the facts and rationale that underlie GDL. Were we to just now be designing a driver licensing system, this would not be an issue. That we are changing something that has been in effect for some time means we must deal with this issue.

Perhaps the notion that GDL is taking away something can be minimized by pointing out that it is not taking anything away from any cohort of drivers to which it applies (this will require a fairly long lead time for GDL legislation to come into effect). Rather, it simply places them under a different system, and one that is designed for their benefit. It is also important to understand (and point out) that unless a novice driver demonstrates a cavalier attitude toward safety by continuing to accumulate citations, none of the restrictions involved in GDL are in effect for very long.

The most appropriate way to address the question of fairness may be to turn the question around and ask whether the current system is fair. A compelling case can be made that the current approach to driver licensing, which results in young drivers having dramatically higher crash rates, is not itself fair. It is not difficult to argue that we, as a society, are shirking our duty to protect our children if we allow such a state of affairs to continue. It is also worth considering that there is substantial legal and social precedent for treating children differently, especially concerning programs and policies designed for their benefit.

PARENTS' VIEWS OF GRADUATED LICENSING

Despite the ease with which GDL can be perceived as inappropriate government intervention in family affairs, it is viewed positively by the general public. It has a logic, backed up by fact, that is compelling. In considering the public's view of GDL, the most relevant populations are those most directly affected: new young drivers and their parents.

Parents of young teenagers might be expected either to oppose or support graduated licensing. Clearly, if parents' perspective on GDL focuses on how it

should reduce the risks to their children, they are quite likely to be supportive. On the other hand, substantial anecdotal evidence suggests that parents look forward to the freedom from chauffeuring their teenage children almost as much as teens look forward to obtaining their license and the freedom it brings. If parents view GDL as extending their years of service, they may not embrace it.

Results from a recent nationwide survey of parents of 17-year-old drivers suggest that there is a substantial degree of support for the concept of GDL in general and for the individual elements often suggested as components of a GDL system (Ferguson & Williams, 1995). Fifty-eight percent were in favor of a GDL system with several months supervised driving, a nighttime driving restriction, and restrictions on transporting teenage passengers. Support was even higher for the individual elements like a minimum period of supervised driving (90%), nighttime driving restriction (74%), and a zero BAC limit (97%). Fewer (43%) supported a restriction on passengers of novice drivers.

These survey results closely parallel anecdotal evidence from several states that have recently attempted to pass one or several elements of a graduated licensing system. If such laws are to be enacted it appears to be critical that the parents who support GDL be vocal about their beliefs, not leaving to chance the kind of opinions that legislators hear from their constituents. If opponents speak up, the points they make can easily hold sway with legislators. It is also important to keep in mind that driving curfews that may have initially been opposed by parents often come to be seen as desirable after they have been enacted.

TEENS' VIEWS OF GRADUATED LICENSING

It is almost axiomatic that teenagers will not accept the notion of GDL because it restricts their mobility and will delay full licensure. Research suggests, however, that teenagers recognize the wisdom of the GDL approach and are not particularly offended by it. Focus group discussions held in North Carolina yielded only two serious concerns about GDL: a curfew and passenger restrictions. Teens who have begun to drive generally admit that they were not very good drivers to begin with, that they didn't have enough supervised experience, and that having a parent ride with them for at least a few months would be a good idea. Anecdotal information of a similar nature comes from other states as well.

Surveys of representative samples of teenagers corroborate the subjective impressions obtained from focus groups and anecdotal reports. Although teens are not particularly enthusiastic about the kinds of

limitations that GDL would impose on them, they do understand and agree with the logic behind the restrictions. In a 1985 survey of teens in four states that have nighttime driving restrictions (curfews), the majority of teens expressed support for these restrictions (ORC, 1985).

The most compelling evidence of teen drivers' positive views on graduated licensing comes from a recent survey of a cohort of teens in New Zealand prior to and following their experience with a full graduated licensing system. It found broad support for the system (Begg et al., 1995). Prior to enactment of the NZ GDL system, which is a comprehensive one, 79% of 15-year-olds agreed with the driving restrictions the system entails. Perhaps more interesting is that among the same group, interviewed three years later after having progressed through the licensing system, fully 70% continued to agree with the restrictions on drivers.

In sum then, although teenagers do not necessarily warmly embrace GDL and the various limitations it imposes on them, neither do they rise up in indignation at any perceived unfairness. Indeed, those who assume teens will roundly oppose such a system clearly are not giving them the credit they deserve.

One objection to nighttime driving restrictions that both teens and especially adults raise is that they will interfere with teens working. This can be overcome by allowing exemptions for driving to and from work. Although this does increase the exposure of teens somewhat to some of the risks of late night driving, such an exemption is unlikely to seriously degrade the benefits of GDL. Only a very small amount of driving by 16-year-olds involves transportation to or from work, especially within the limited duration of most recommended driving curfews (typically about six months). Moreover, the most dangerous aspect of late night driving exposure is that which occurs inside the vehicle, with a number of age peers possibly distracting the driver and encouraging him or her to take risks. Such risks do not accompany travel involved in work or transport to and from work. Hence, if only nighttime *recreational* driving is the target of a driving restriction, parents and legislators are less likely to object and most of the benefits are likely to be retained.

OVERBURDENING THE DRIVER LICENSING AGENCY

The only good justification for having a driver licensing requirement is to promote traffic safety. Nonetheless, driver licensing and the large bureaucracy that supports it has become an entity unto itself. Accordingly, when the prospect of complicating the licensing process arises,

the licensing 'system' itself may respond with skepticism. It goes without saying that enacting a GDL system without the support of the state licensing agency is unlikely.

A comprehensive GDL system will inevitably make the licensing process more complex. This constitutes an added burden both on individuals who wish to become licensed and on the system charged with issuing licenses. If a person must pass through three (or more) stages in the licensing process, each with a distinctive license, then more personnel may be required in the licensing agency to handle the added work. In addition, equipment may need to be upgraded, computer software used to maintain driver records will likely need to be modified, and waiting times at licensing offices may well increase as a result of the additional visits required for novice drivers to obtain additional licenses. All these are legitimate concerns. They entail real and immediate costs at a time when available funding for government services is dwindling. Whether such costs will be offset by reduced crash-related costs is a critical consideration and, unfortunately, one that can not currently be addressed precisely.

It is worth noting here that advances in technology may well permit the issuance of appropriate interim permits without additional visits to a driver licensing office. In the very near future, photographs will be stored as digital images and will not need to be taken each time a license is issued. Thus, it may not be necessary to increase personnel to avoid degrading service to the driving public as more licenses are issued in a GDL system.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The problem that GDL seeks to address is large and serious. Although GDL cannot be expected to solve this problem alone, there appears to be sufficient empirical evidence and a sound conceptual rationale to believe that it will have clear, measurable benefits. At the same time it is inescapable that a GDL system will limit the mobility of novice drivers. These limitations are not great, however, nor do they last very long. A well-conceived GDL system can minimize these limitations without sacrificing the benefits to be achieved. The challenge is to successfully navigate the legislative

process, addressing the legitimate questions that are raised, to achieve such a system, rather than one that is graduated in name only. If a proposed GDL system is put forth in the appropriate manner, presenting the issues in the desired perspective from the beginning, it should be possible to enact beneficial GDL systems in a number of states during the next few years.

REFERENCES

- Begg, D.J.; Langley, J.D.; Reeder, A.I.; and Chalmers, D.J. (1994). The New Zealand Graduated Driver Licensing System: the attitudes towards and the experiences of teenagers to this car drivers licensing system. Dunedin, NZ: Injury Prevention Unit, University of Otago Medical School.
- Ferguson, S.A. and Williams, A.F. (1995). Parents' views of driver licensing practices in the United States. Arlington, VA: Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.
- Frith, W.J. and Perkins, W.A. (1992). The New Zealand Graduated Driver Licensing System. Presented at the Road Traffic Safety Council Research Seminar. Wellington, New Zealand.
- Hagge, R.A. and Marsh, W.C. (1988). An Evaluation of the Traffic Safety Impact of Provisional Licensing. Sacramento, CA: Department of Motor Vehicles. Research Report No. CAL-DMV-RSS-88-116.
- McKnight, A.J.; Hyle, P.; and Albricht, L. (1983). Youth License Control Demonstration Project. (DOT HS-806 616.) National Highway Transportation Safety Administration. Washington, DC.
- Opinion Research Corporation. (1985). Teenage driving curfews: A market research study to determine teenagers' awareness and attitudes toward driving curfews in four states. Princeton, NJ: Opinion Research Corporation.
- Simpson, H. (1990). Importing and exporting countermeasures: Cultural determinants of success. Alcohol, Drugs and Traffic Safety - T89, Vol. 11. Chicago: National Safety Council.