

Coffee and Conversation Speaker Series

Proceedings from “Young Drivers, Driver Education, and the Change in Age of Licensure”

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In building on the Coffee and Conversation III theme “Building Resilience into a Transportation System for All,” Arthur Goodwin, Associate Director for Behavioral Research at UNC Highway Safety Research Center, discussed driver education and licensure among young drivers.

Motor vehicle crashes are a leading cause of death among people ages 15 to 19, said Goodwin, citing the Centers for Disease and Prevention (CDC). He began his talk by defining what we mean when we say “young drivers.” We are “going to be talking about 15-, 16-, and 17-year-olds,” said Goodwin.

He listed a number of reasons for the crashes among young drivers: alcohol, cell phones, inexperience, speeding, and risk taking. Inexperience is the leading reason for crashes, said Goodwin. Alcohol is a risk between ages 19 and 31. Cell phones as a reason is hard to establish since drivers are reluctant to admit they were distracted in this way or may not know. The National Household Travel Survey estimates that 14% of crashes are from distracted drivers. Speeding and risk-taking are certainly issues, said Goodwin, but not to the extent that inexperience plays a role.

A history of the licensure process is where this begins. Until the 1970s licenses were given by passing a road test, said Goodwin. There was no training requirement. One learned how to drive in any manner. Later, there were some requirements for 30 hours of training, followed by 6 hours of driving practice.

“Driving is not that different from learning how to play a sport, or an instrument,” said Goodwin. “Six hours is not enough time to get good at something.”

In the 1970s, HSRC’s Patricia F. Waller wrote a paper proposing Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL). This method has since been adopted in every state to differing degrees. In North Carolina, the requirements are 60 hours of driving time during the permit period, a provisional license period, and then a fully licensed driver.

Permit users have low crash rates. Licensed drivers have much higher crash rates in the first six months of licensure, and then it slows down within 2 years. This runs along the basic learning curve, according to Goodwin.

Goodwin's active areas of research include young driver safety, GDL, motorcycle safety, distracted driving and cell phones, occupant protection and impaired driving. As a psychologist, his work focuses on the behavioral, social and cultural aspects of traffic injury prevention, with an eye toward developing effective policies and programs to improve transportation safety.

GDL occurs in generally two stages before full licensure:

Stage 1: Learner Permit. In North Carolina, the permit phase is at least 12 months. Permit holders must be supervised and must log 60 hours of practice (10 of which must be at night).

- There isn't much research on how much time teens need to learn.
- A recent HSRC survey of parents in four states asked how much time teens needed in order to learn to drive. Parents had different answers. Why? Because states have different laws. Most parents answered according to the laws of their state.

Stage 2: Provisional License. In North Carolina, this stage is 6 months in duration. Teens may drive unsupervised, however, there is a night restriction. Additionally, the driver is limited to one teen passenger in the car.

At all stages, drivers are not to use their cell phones. They must use seatbelts. If the driver gets a ticket, the clock starts over on becoming a fully licensed driver.

NC was the first state to start GDL. The results were reductions in crashes: 38% for 16-year-olds and 20% for 17-year-olds.

TRENDS IN LICENSING

Goodwin says there have been reductions in licensing but not as portrayed by the media. The Monitoring the Future Survey (MTF) is an ongoing study of the behaviors, attitudes, and values of American secondary school students, college students, and young adults. Each year, a total of approximately 50,000 8th, 10th and 12th grade students are surveyed (12th graders since 1975, and 8th and 10th graders since 1991). The MTF Study has been funded under a series of investigator-initiated competing research grants from the National Institute on Drug Abuse, a part of the National Institutes of Health. MTF is conducted at the Survey Research Center in the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan.

According to MTF, 85% of 17-year-olds in 1996 were licensed to drive. In 2015, that number decreased to 71%. Among 16-year-olds, the rate went down from 68% in 1996 to 58% in 2015.

Goodwin attributes the technological and generational shifts to this decrease. Some factors include:

- Income (has a big impact on whether a teen gets licensed).
- Increasing use of digital means (teens can connect through social media).
- Ride-sharing and micro-mobility (Uber and Lyft make automobiles not as necessary).
- The decline of car culture in the United States.

The advantage of delayed licensure is a reduction in crashes. However, the disadvantage is that these people are missing out on the benefits of the GDL process.

TEEN VEHICLES

Another safety concern for teens is that they tend to drive older, used vehicles. The safety of these older cars is seldom considered.

Recommendations for vehicles for teens include:

- Vehicles 2013 or newer. Many of the latest safety features became available in this year.
- Bigger/heavier vehicles, instead of compact cars.
- Side/curtain airbags.
- Antilock brakes.
- Advanced detection/warning.
- Safety ratings should be among the best.

The Insurance Institute for Highway Safety has vehicle recommendations that meet these standards.

Resources:

<http://www.monitoringthefuture.org>

<https://iprc.unc.edu/news-events/patricia-f-waller-annual-lecture/>