

July 3, 2006

Licensing Restrictions Save Young Drivers' Lives, Study Says

By [MATTHEW L. WALD](#)

WASHINGTON, July 2 — Laws that restrict 16-year-old drivers from carrying passengers and from driving at night help cut fatal accidents substantially, according to a new study.

The study examined Graduated Driver Licensing, a system of issuing new drivers a probationary license with multiple restrictions that are phased out over several months. It found that in states with such programs, the rate of 16-year-olds involved in fatal accidents was 20 percent lower than in states without them.

More than 1,100 people, many of them children or teenagers, were killed in 2004 in crashes where one of the drivers was 16. And 16-year-olds are about twice as likely as older drivers to be involved in a fatal accident, according to experts.

At the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#), Nicole R. Nason, who became administrator in May, said that in states that did not have such rules, parents themselves should lay down the law.

Ms. Nason said the study, which was performed under contract to the traffic agency by the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, was persuasive but might induce "statistics fatigue" among parents. Parents of young drivers, she said, "don't have to have a state law" to enforce such restrictions.

A study of death statistics in 43 states from 1994 to 2004 found that involvement of 16-year-olds in fatal crashes was 16 percent to 21 percent lower in states that had seven elements of a graduated program.

Two other elements that were listed as particularly effective were a waiting period of at least three months between getting a learner's permit and an intermediate license, and a requirement for 30 or more hours of supervised driving before taking a road test. The others were a minimum age for learner's permit of 15½, a minimum age for an intermediate license of 16 and minimum age for a full license of 17.

Restrictions on teenagers carrying passengers vary from state to state, but generally limit the number of other teenage passengers, sometimes not allowing them at all, unless an older person is also in the car. The restrictions on driving at night sometimes make exceptions for 16-year-olds driving to work. At least five of the seven elements are in force in 19 states, according to the traffic safety agency.

Experts say that restrictions based on the age of the driver can be difficult to enforce because police officers will not know the age of the driver without pulling the car over and requesting identification.

Many states adopted graduated licenses over the 11 years covered by the study. The study compared states with graduated systems and states without, and compared numbers for states before and after they enacted graduated systems. Six states were excluded from the study because they changed their laws more than twice during the period.

When driver fatality rates are broken down by age, the rate for the youngest drivers is nearly 35 per 100,000 licensed drivers, compared with around 10 for the safest group, people from age 35 to 74. The rate rises again for people over 74, experts said, partly because of drivers' declining abilities, and partly because crashes that are survivable for younger people often kill the elderly.

The reduction for 16-year-olds in states with graduated licenses did not carry over to safer rates for young adults as those people aged, the study's authors said. And they said they were unable to determine to what extent the restrictions made 16-year-olds safer simply by making them drive less.

Among the nearly 9,000 16-year-olds involved in fatal crashes over the course of the study, boys outnumbered girls by two to one.

Many states and independent experts have been trying to expand the role of parents in encouraging safe driving among teenagers.

But an article in the June issue of *Injury Prevention*, a scholarly journal published by Children's Hospital of Philadelphia with sponsorship from State Farm Insurance, notes that even with graduated licensing, limits set by the government still leave teenagers with the opportunity to drive in hazardous situations. Thus, it said, parents must "manage risk with little guidance from policy or elsewhere."

The study, by two researchers at the [National Institutes of Health](#), Bruce Simons-Morton and

M. C. Ouimet, said that parents were more likely to set limits on where teenagers were going and when they would return than on other conditions that influence risk, like the number of teenage passengers, night driving or driving in bad weather.

Ms. Nason, 35, said parents played a major role in how safely their children drove. When she learned to drive, she said, her father, Phil Robilotto, was the chief of the highway patrol in Suffolk County, N.Y.

"He was less concerned that I made an exact proper three-point turn than that I wasn't speeding or driving aggressively, and I wasn't allowing myself to wave to a friend going by on a bike," she said. "The mechanics of driving were less critical to him than the larger message of being safe in the vehicle and making sure people around you were safe."

[Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company](#)

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)
