

Traffic Safety Facts

Traffic Tech – Technology Transfer Series

Passenger Restrictions in Graduated Driver Licensing Programs

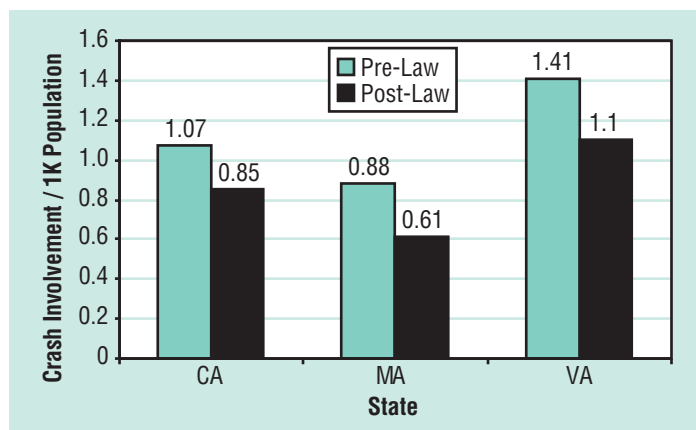
There is greatly increased crash risk when teenage drivers transport passengers, and the more passengers, the greater the risk. Risk increases with one, two, or three or more passengers, such that when there are multiple passengers in the vehicle, crash risk is 3 to 5 times greater than when driving alone. Passenger presence is associated with increased crash risk for both male and female teen drivers; risk is greater for younger teens age 16 and 17 than for older teen drivers. The increased risk with passengers has been found for all types of crashes: property damage, nonfatal injury, and fatal.

NHTSA contracted with Preusser Research Group (PRG) to evaluate the passenger restriction components of several graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws on safe driving practices, and teen crashes and fatalities. PRG also assessed compliance with and enforcement of the passenger restriction of a GDL law among teen drivers, parents of teen drivers, and law enforcement personnel.

Crash Analyses

Selected study States were California, Massachusetts, and Virginia. Each State was paired with a matching comparison State (Arizona for California, Connecticut for Massachusetts, and Maryland for Virginia) to help control for confounding variables. Time series analyses were run on crash data from these States.

Figure 1. Crash Involvement/1K Population for 16-Year-Old Drivers



The crash analyses support the contention that passenger restrictions reduce crashes among 16-year-old drivers. Increases in other types of crashes or an increase in overall injuries does not appear to offset this decrease. Results indicate that in California there are, on average, 740 fewer 16-year-old drivers involved in crashes each year. In Massachusetts, the average annual reduction is 173 and in Virginia it is 454. Further analyses revealed that the decreased teen crash rates were not part of a larger trend of decreasing crash rates among all drivers, and that injury crashes involving more than one passenger under 18 in two of the States (MA and VA) actually decreased among 16-year-old drivers.

Focus Groups

Nine focus groups were conducted in each of the three States for this study (California, Massachusetts, and Virginia) with teen drivers, parents of teen drivers, and law enforcement officers.

Parents

Nearly all parents recognized that teen passengers increase the risk of crashes and injuries among newly licensed teen drivers. As a result, many parents imposed some rules and restrictions, allowing their newly licensed sons or daughters to drive under certain circumstances. Usually they imposed a curfew, and often a passenger restriction. A surprisingly large number of the participating families had written parent/teen behavioral contracts regulating driving for a period of time after licensure.

Many parents had ambivalent attitudes towards GDL. Most recognized the need for such laws, but many felt the laws were unfair to their own children because they perceived their children as responsible and capable drivers. Some parents liked the GDL laws because they would have imposed restrictions anyway, and the law saved them the trouble of negotiating restrictions with their teen drivers.

All parents were aware that there were curfew and passenger restrictions, although many were unsure or mistaken about the details of their State's law. The perceived benefits of the passenger restrictions were that they reduce distractions and

eliminate peer pressure to engage in risky driving behavior. Two major criticisms of passenger restrictions included the fact that they were not routinely enforced by law enforcement and parents felt that many of their children's friends paid no attention to it. Few parents believed that the teen passenger restrictions are vigorously enforced, even in Massachusetts, where non-compliance is a primary violation. Usually, parents restricted their teens from carrying passengers whom they do not know or particular friends they had reason to believe would be a bad influence, but many permitted their children to violate the law when they felt the risk was acceptable. Very few parents monitored their children's compliance with the State's legal passenger restrictions.

Teens

Teens generally agreed that driving with teen passengers in the car increases the risk of crashes and injured. While most teens did not like having parentally imposed rules and restrictions on their driving, most teens had some rules and restrictions, and were resigned to accepting them.

Teens were more knowledgeable about the GDL laws in their State than parents were, but many had misconceptions (e.g., timeframes for nighttime restrictions, length of time passenger restrictions are in effect, etc.). While acknowledging the benefits of teen passenger restrictions, teens expressed more objections than parents did (e.g., inconvenient, wasteful of gasoline, etc.). Compared to parents, teens were somewhat more likely to believe that police were enforcing the passenger restriction, but most perceived the likelihood of getting a ticket as very low. Some teens knew that non-compliance was a secondary violation in their State, but many did not. Most teens knew that many of their friends violated the restriction all the time and had never been ticketed for it.

Very few teens complied with the passenger restriction all of the time. Some violated the restriction with their parents' permission and others avoided situations where their parents would know about it. Some attempted to avoid tickets by not carrying passengers in view of police at school and obeying traffic laws to avoid being stopped.

Law Enforcement

Police in all three States acknowledged that carrying teen passengers increases the risk of crashes and injury among young drivers. Generally, police officers were in favor of GDL and felt that the passenger restriction is more important

than the curfew from a highway safety viewpoint. All the participating law enforcement agencies had outreach programs to educate new teen drivers and parent groups on safe driving practices, including the passenger restriction.

Police in all three States said that their State's teen passenger restrictions were difficult to enforce. Although noncompliance with the passenger restriction is a primary violation in Massachusetts, police make few primary stops because it is difficult to judge the age of occupants in a moving vehicle. Even after a stop for another violation, passenger restriction citations are difficult because a registry check is required to determine if the driver has been licensed less than six months, and passengers are not required to produce identification without probable cause (MA only). Virginia traffic patrol officers reported that they cite every passenger restriction violation they can when making a stop. While Virginia officers can determine whether the driver is restricted from information shown on the license, they have some difficulty in determining the age and relationship of the passengers before writing a citation. Officers complained about the sibling exemption. California officers had no complaints about difficulties in writing passenger restriction citations after making a stop because restricted licenses are clearly marked and exceptions require prior authorization by the DMV.

Police in all States recognized that outside of the traffic enforcement units, few officers wrote many passenger restriction citations. Other officers had higher priorities and, when making traffic stops, usually only wrote tickets for the stopping violations. Factors that discouraged law enforcement officers from citing violations include sympathy for the violators and lenient treatment of juvenile violators by the courts. None of the departments have conducted any special emphasis patrols or training on passenger restrictions, although the Fairfax County, Virginia, police do have special traffic enforcement patrols around schools in the fall and spring.

How to Order

To order *Passenger Restrictions in Graduated Driver Licensing Programs* (50 pages plus appendices) prepared by Preusser Research Group, write to the Office of Behavioral Safety Research, NHTSA, NTI-130, 1200 New Jersey Avenue SE., Washington, DC 20590, fax 202-366-7096, or download from www.nhtsa.dot.gov. Patty Ellison-Potter, Ph.D., was the Task Order Manager for this project.



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