

Views of Connecticut Parents of Teens and Other Adults about Graduated Licensing Upgrades

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Abstract. Introduction: Many states, including Connecticut, have strengthened their licensing laws in response to continuing teen deaths. Connecticut is considering further changes and it is likely that other states will do the same. **Methods:** Parents of teens and a sample of other adults were interviewed by telephone to determine their views about enhancements to the learner stage and to existing night and passenger restrictions. **Results:** Connecticut parents were well aware of the provisions of the current law. The majority of parents of teens and a majority of “other adults” supported a requirement for increased driving supervision, a longer permit period, a longer-term passenger restriction, and a night restriction starting earlier than midnight. About half favored a higher minimum permit age. Support was highest among “other adults,” and among females in both groups. **Impact on industry:** Survey results such as these can provide guidance to states wishing to reduce the young driver problem through changes in licensing laws.

Introduction

All states and the District of Columbia now have at least one of the three core elements of a graduated licensing system (GDL): an enhanced learner stage, and late-night and passenger restrictions upon initial licensure. There is substantial variation in graduated systems, each jurisdiction having a unique set of requirements, and some are stronger than others. In the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety’s (IIHS) rating system (poor, marginal, fair, good), as of early 2008, 10 were rated marginal, 12 fair, and 29 good.

State and national studies indicate that graduated systems reduce crashes. Shope (2007) reviewed 21 state studies and six national studies conducted since 2002, noted that the results were “surprisingly consistent,” and that “Overall, GDL programs have reduced the youngest drivers’ crash risk by roughly 20% to 40%.” This is a highly positive effect but not a panacea. Thirty states have strengthened their licensing systems over the years. There are several ways to do so working within the three “core” elements listed above. For example, required minimum learner periods can be lengthened, supervised driving requirements increased, night restrictions can be set to start earlier in the evening, passenger restrictions tightened to reduce vehicle occupancy, and minimum time periods for night and passenger restrictions can be extended.

The views of parents are critical in any consideration of GDL upgrades. Parents are the primary constituency for legislators who are debating the GDL law, and parents are on the front line with respect to implementing and monitoring compliance with restrictions

once the law is adopted. If parents are not aware and appreciative of the rationale for more stringent restrictions, strengthening the law may have little impact.

In legislative debates, there has been limited attention paid to the views of parents, what they think of the restrictions under consideration, or how they are currently handling or intend to deal with the behavior in question in the absence of a law. It is known, however, that both parents of teens and the general public are strong supporters of GDL and its separate components, and it is likely that if their views were followed, there would be stronger licensing systems (Ferguson & Williams, 1996; Mayhew et al., 1998, 1999; Williams et al., 1998; Insurance Research Council, 1999; 2001; Williams, Nelson, & Leaf, 2002).

The Connecticut Law

Connecticut provides a good case study of the relationship between legislative action and parental views. The law has been changed several times. In 1997 a six month minimum learner period was introduced, but no other GDL features were included until a passenger restriction went into effect in 2004. During the first three months, only one parent or other licensed driver age 20 or more could accompany the driver; the second three months, only parents, one other licensed driver age 20 or more, and other immediate family members were allowed. In 2005 a nighttime restriction from midnight to 5 a.m. was added, and the passenger restriction was amended to allow both parents as passengers in the first three months. The current law is rated “good” in the IIHS rating scheme.

The 1997 six month learner period (four months with driver education) reduced crashes. Since the licensing process in Connecticut does not start until age 16, this had the effect of raising the age at which a full license could be obtained. The result was a 27% reduction in crash involvement of 16-year-olds (Ulmer et al., 2001). No further evaluations of Connecticut’s GDL provisions have been conducted.

Connecticut Surveys

Surveys of parents of teenagers in Connecticut were conducted in 1996 and 1999, before and after the new learner requirement became law. Parents viewed the new rule positively, and also endorsed night and passenger restrictions and graduated licensing in general (Ferguson et al., 2001). The same parents were interviewed on both occasions, before and after their teens obtained licenses. At the time of the first interview, the six-month learner period had just been enacted, the night restriction had been debated but rejected, and a passenger restriction had not been discussed. The new learner period requirement received nearly universal support, with 92% of parents favoring it before their teen was licensed and 99% after their teen had gone through the licensing process. Night and passenger restrictions also received strong and increasing support. Night restrictions were favored by 80% in 1996, 85% in 1999; passenger restrictions by 58% in 1996 and 72% in 1999. In 1999, 67% of parents of teens in Connecticut approved of a graduated system including the extended learner permit plus both night and passenger

restrictions. Thus support for a strong graduated system, including night and passenger restrictions, was evident among Connecticut parents in the late 1990s, although it took several years for these elements to be added.

In the early 2000s, prior to the introduction of night and passenger restrictions, it was possible to obtain a more thorough reading of the views and licensing practices of Connecticut parents (Williams et al., 2006). Parents were strongly supportive of graduated licensing concepts although they were not asked directly about night or passenger restrictions. Of concern, however, is that parents did not seem to understand or appreciate the risks of having teen passengers in the car. When asked how often they would allow driving in 12 different risk situations in the first few months of licensure, Connecticut parents were most likely to say they would allow one teen passenger, a high risk scenario not permitted under the upcoming law. On the other hand, they were well aware of the risk of late-night driving, driving after midnight ranking number one on the list of risk activities they planned to curtail, suggesting that the 2005 midnight restriction may have limited effect.

New Initiatives

In 2008, Connecticut is considering new GDL changes. Governor Rell, noting that many teens are still being killed in motor vehicle crashes, appointed a special task force to assess and recommend new strategies to address this problem. As part of this process, enhancements of the key GDL components-- the learner stage and night and passenger restrictions—are under consideration. The prior Connecticut surveys were conducted both before and after GDL legislation was in force. In the present case, it was possible to survey Connecticut parents as the legislation was being considered, asking about knowledge and appreciation of risk factors, knowledge about the current law, and attitudes toward the new requirements proposed. This information should be instructive for Connecticut, as well as for other states considering GDL upgrades.

The present survey included parents of teens plus a separate sample of other Connecticut adults. Prior surveys in Connecticut included only parents of teens. It is known that both parents and adults in general favor GDL and its components, but these results come from separate surveys. The present survey provided an opportunity to compare the two groups.

Methods

TMR, Inc. was contracted to conduct the telephone surveys. There were two sample populations: parents of a 15, 16, or 17 year-old, and adults 18 years or older who did not have children of these ages.

Calls were made from a random sample of 18,000 Connecticut phone numbers. All calls were made during the week of January 7, 2008. The goal was to obtain 400 respondents from each group, and the non-parent group was sampled such that the distribution of

male and female respondents would match the distribution in Connecticut (51% female, 49% male).

In all, 11,562 phone numbers were dialed. Each number could receive a maximum of four callbacks. The bulk of calls did not connect with potential interviewees. These included calls where there was no answer, answering machines, busy signals, non-working numbers, fax or computer, and duplicate numbers. Of those reached, there were 807 completed surveys. Non-interviews included 70 people who did not speak English, 32 who could not be interviewed for various reasons, 107 who would have been part of the non-parent group but the goal of 400 had already been reached, and 630 refusals.

Results

There were 398 parents and 409 other adults interviewed. Sampling error is approximately +/-5 percent. In the parent group, 67% of respondents were female compared with 52% of the other adults. Education level also differed in the two groups. More parents had completed college or had advanced degrees (76%) than other adults (57%). Ages were not requested, but it is likely that the other adult group included more younger and more older respondents than the parents-of-teens group.

Four questions were asked about awareness of the current law.

1. Were you aware that the law states that a driver must be 16 to get a permit and that the permit must be held for 4 to 6 months before taking the road test?
2. Were you aware that drivers in Connecticut under 18 must have at least 20 hours of supervised driving before being able to take their road test?
3. Were you aware that in Connecticut for a period of time drivers under 18 are not allowed to carry passengers other than their parents?
4. Were you aware that in Connecticut drivers under 18 are not permitted to drive after midnight (with some specific exceptions)?

Responses of parents of teens (Parents) and adult non-parents of teens (Other Adults) are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Awareness of the Current Law, Percent Aware

	Parents	Other Adults
Permit age and length	97	84
Supervised driving hours	91	73
Passenger limits	93	77
Nighttime limits	81	52

As would be expected, parents of teens were more likely than adults in general to know the law. Most parents said they knew these provisions. The night restriction was least known by parents and, especially, other adults.

The following questions were asked about risk awareness:

1. How much do you agree with the statement: In general drivers under 18 are more likely to have an accident or cause an accident when they have other teens in the car with them?
2. How much do you agree with the statement: Drivers under 18 are more likely to have an accident or cause an accident at night than older drivers?

These are not precisely parallel questions, but there was much more agreement with the statement about passengers than the statement about night driving. Seventy percent of parents and 75% of other adults completely agreed that passengers would increase crash risk, and 22% of parents and 16% of other adults somewhat agreed. Only 5% of parents and 4% of other adults disagreed.

In contrast, only 35% of parents and 37% of other adults completely agreed with the statement about nighttime risk, 28% and 25% somewhat agreed, and 21% of parents and 23% of other adults disagreed that night driving was more risky for teens than for older drivers.

In terms of possible new law provisions regarding the permit stage and night and passenger restrictions, these questions were posed.

1. Would you support a longer permit holding period for drivers under 18?
2. Would you support an increase in the minimum age at which a driver may get a learner's permit?
3. Would you support increasing the minimum required amount of supervised driving for drivers under 18?
4. Would you support lengthening the time that drivers under 18 may not carry passengers other than their parents?
5. Would you support a time earlier than midnight for the night driving restriction to begin?

The full array of responses of parents is shown in Table 2. Table 3 displays the data for other adults.

Table 2. Parent Support for New Law Provisions, Percent Agreeing

	Longer Permit	Higher Permit Age	More Supervision	Longer Passenger Limit	Earlier Curfew
Completely support	48	32	61	46	38
Somewhat support	15	14	14	18	13
Somewhat oppose	11	17	6	11	14
Completely oppose	21	33	14	20	30
Neither support nor oppose	5	3	6	3	5
Don't know/refused	1	2	0	2	0
Total*	101	101	101	100	100

** Does not always add to 100 due to rounding.*

Table 3. Other Adult Support for New Law Provisions, Percent Agreeing

	Longer Permit	Higher Permit Age	More Supervision	Longer Passenger Limit	Earlier Curfew
Completely support	59	42	65	54	43
Somewhat support	12	12	11	15	16
Somewhat oppose	7	14	8	8	11
Completely oppose	13	26	12	18	25
Neither support nor oppose	6	4	3	4	4
Don't know/refused	4	1	2	2	1
Total*	101	99	101	101	100

** Does not always add to 100 due to rounding.*

Among both groups, there was greatest support for more supervised driving in the learner stage, followed by extending the learner period. There was least support for a higher permit age, although overall about half favored a higher age. More respondents in both groups were in favor of extending the passenger restriction period than establishing an earlier starting time for the night restrictions, although both measures received majority support.

Table 4 collapses Tables 2 and 3 to display the percentage of parents and other adults who supported (completely or somewhat) the five measures. Adults from the general population were more likely than parents of teens to favor enhanced GDL provisions.

Table 4. Overall Support for New Law Provisions, Percent in Favor

	Parents	Other Adults
Longer permit	63	70*
Higher permit age	46	55*
More supervision	75	76
Longer passenger limits	64	68
Earlier curfew	51	59*

* $p < .05$

Table 5 displays Table 4 data by gender. In both groups, females were more supportive than males of enhanced GDL sanctions in Connecticut. Note that since the parent group includes a higher proportion of females, the extent to which other adults are more in favor than parents of new sanctions is even greater than indicated in Table 4. If the two groups were equalized in terms of gender composition, the differences would be 59% for parents and 70% for other adults in favor of a longer permit, 44% vs. 55% for a higher permit age, 73% vs. 76% for more supervision, 64% vs. 68% (no change) for longer passenger permits, and 50% vs. 59% for an earlier curfew.

Table 5. Support for New Law Provisions by Gender, Percent in Favor

	Parents		Other Adults	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Longer permit	50	69*	63	78*
Higher permit age	40	49	47	63*
More suspension	66	79*	69	83*
Longer passenger limits	63	64	61	76*
Earlier curfew	46	54	60	60

* $p < .01$

Respondents who said they were in favor of an earlier starting time for a night driving restriction were asked about their preferred time. Table 6 shows that overall, 10 and 11 p.m. were the most popular choices, about equally so. Consistent with Table 4 data, adults other than parents were more likely than parents to choose earlier start times: 61% preferred 10 p.m. or earlier compared with 45% of parents ($\chi^2=11.58, p<.01$). There were no gender differences in choice of start time.

Table 6. Preferred Starting Time for Nighttime Restriction, Percent in Favor

	Parents	Other Adults
9 p.m. or earlier	6	15
10 p.m.	38	46
11 p.m.	50	37
Midnight	5	2
Total*	99	100

**Does not always add to 100 due to rounding.*

Educational level was related inconsistently to preferences for upgraded GDL provisions. Those with more formal education were more in favor of some of the measures, less in favor of others. The differences in educational level between parents and other adults did not help to explain the differences between these groups on their views about GDL laws.

Discussion

How knowledgeable are parents and other adults about crash risk factors for teens, how well do they know the provisions of the current licensing law for beginners, and what are their views of changes that would give the law more strength? These were the three main questions investigated in the present study, undertaken at a time when Connecticut was actively considering these and other new provisions. Answers to these questions speak both to the Connecticut situation and to other states considering new legislation.

Most Connecticut parents of teens were aware of the provisions of the current law, as were many of the other adults surveyed. Both groups were least aware of the post-midnight driving restriction, the last of the core GDL provisions enacted in Connecticut, in 2005. Parents and other adults were equally aware of the heightened crash risk when teens travel with teens, more than 9 out of 10 acknowledging the dangers of this travel pattern. There was substantially less recognition of the risk of late-night travel for teens, although the question addressing this asked about nighttime risk in relation to older drivers rather than risk for teen drivers alone. Phrased differently, late-night driving among teens may have achieved higher recognition as a risk factor. A prior Connecticut survey showed high recognition of the risk of post-midnight driving but low recognition of the risk of travel with other teens, rather than high recognition as in the present survey. Given the sharp increase in crash risk when teens travel with other teens, this is a key finding.

The five law enhancements related to the core features of GDL received strong support, although an increase in the permit age was endorsed by only about half. Connecticut already has as high a minimum permit age (16); the majority of states allow earlier starts at 15 or 15 ½ for example, so this finding is not surprising. Despite the support for stronger laws, there was also considerable minority opposition, and as indicated in Tables

2 and 3, those opposed were more likely to be completely rather than somewhat against the measure. By the same token, however, those in favor of upgraded provisions were more likely to be in complete support rather than being somewhat supportive.

In highway safety surveys, women are invariably more safety oriented than men, and that was the case in the present survey as they were more likely to endorse upgraded law provisions. Unexpected, however, was the finding that adults from the general population were more supportive than parents of teens of enhanced GDL rules. This could have something to do with differences in ages of the two groups, which could not be investigated in this study. Adults who do not have teen drivers in their household may be more concerned about the threat teen drivers pose to them on the roads. Parents may feel they would be inconvenienced by the tougher measures, or believe that their son or daughter does not need these rules. Future surveys in which both parents of teens and other adults are included can explore reasons for these differences. Whatever the case, survey results indicate that Connecticut adults in general are not satisfied with the status quo and would be receptive to measures that are designed to reduce the young driver problem further.

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