

Views of Parents of Teenagers About Graduated Licensing After Experience with the Laws

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Parents of 15 year-olds in Florida and Connecticut were first interviewed in 1996 about their views concerning new licensing requirements in their states. Connecticut had introduced a 6-month learner's permit requirement, effectively increasing the licensing age from 16 years to 16 years, 6 months (16 years, 4 months with driver education). Florida enacted a 6-month learner's permit period plus a night driving restriction for 16 and 17 year-olds. In 1996, parents were very supportive of the new requirements, particularly the minimum permit period and nighttime restrictions, even though they recognized they would be inconvenienced to some extent. The same parents were interviewed again in 1999, after most of their teenagers had obtained driver's licenses, and were even more supportive than before of the additional restrictions. Few parents reported that the laws inconvenienced them, and less than 20 percent said the laws had made it harder for their teenagers to get jobs. Furthermore, many were in favor of additional requirements, such as teenage passenger restrictions, not currently part of their states' laws. These findings should encourage other states to proceed with graduated licensing systems or to augment systems already in place.

Keywords: Graduated licensing, state laws, teenagers, crash risk

INTRODUCTION

During the past few years many U.S. states have adopted graduated licensing laws as a way to reduce the very high crash rates of young, beginning drivers (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and Traffic Injury Research Foundation, 1999). Graduated licensing is a way to introduce beginning drivers to the complex task of driving by allowing them to graduate

over time from less hazardous driving situations to more hazardous ones as they gain experience and mature. This is achieved by requiring beginning drivers to progress through a series of stages before they can obtain full-privilege licenses. First is an extended learner's permit period, preferably of at least 6 months, so that beginning drivers can accumulate experience in a variety of situations. This is followed by an initial license, typically of 6 months or more,

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that restricts unsupervised driving to less hazardous driving situations by, for example, limiting nighttime driving and driving with other teenagers in the car. Only after these requirements have been met can a full, unrestricted license be obtained.

Although a few states have had elements of graduated licensing, such as night driving restrictions, for many years, the concept of graduated licensing has not caught on until recently. Since 1996, 31 states and the District of Columbia have adopted graduated licensing (July 1, 2000). There are key provisions that are recommended (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety and Traffic Injury Research Foundation, 1999), but each state has adopted its own version. Across these states there are large variations in the length of the learner's permit period, the type and duration of restrictions when first licensed, and the age at which a teenager can graduate from the system and obtain a full, unrestricted license. However, a feature common to all the systems is that teenage drivers are delayed in their ability to drive anytime, anywhere, with whomever they choose. This puts an increased burden on parents to provide their teenagers with opportunities to gain driving experience and to transport them at times when unsupervised driving is restricted.

In spite of these increased responsibilities, parents are very supportive of graduated licensing. Surveys in Nova Scotia and Ontario, Canada, where graduated licensing programs have been in place since 1994, found approval ratings of 80–90 percent for the programs among parents whose teenagers were going through the licensing system (Mayhew *et al.*, 1998, 1999). In the United States, parents of 17 year-olds who were surveyed in 1994, before any state had adopted graduated licensing, indicated strong support for such programs (Ferguson and Williams, 1996). Parents overwhelmingly supported restrictions for beginning drivers such as minimum periods of supervised driving and night driving restrictions, and close to 60 percent endorsed the concept of graduated licensing. But none of these parents had direct experience with graduated licensing, and the majority of their teenagers already held driver's licenses. Thus it is of interest to determine the acceptability of such programs when in place.

Florida was the first state to adopt a full graduated licensing system in July 1996. Prior to the new law, Florida teenagers could obtain learner's permits at age 15, though it was not required, and unrestricted licenses at age 16. The new law requires beginning drivers to obtain learner's permits and hold them for 6 months. Once licensed, 16 and 17 year-olds are subject to a night driving restriction and zero tolerance for alcohol (effective January 1, 1997), and their licenses can be suspended with fewer points than for adult drivers. In January 1997, Connecticut introduced a learner's permit with a required holding period. Prior to the new law, Connecticut did not have a learner's permit. Rather, practice driving with a parent, guardian, or driver education instructor generally was permitted at age 16, and an unrestricted license could be obtained at age 16. The new law requires beginning 16- and 17-year-old drivers to obtain learner's permits and hold them for at least 6 months (4 months with driver education). Because the permit cannot be obtained before age 16, the law effectively raises the age for an unrestricted license to 16 years, 6 months (16 years, 4 months with driver education). Recent studies have indicated that adoption of these new licensing requirements both in Florida and Connecticut have resulted in significant reductions in crash rates among 16-year-old drivers (Ulmer *et al.*, in press; Ulmer *et al.*, 2000).

Parents of 15 year-olds in Florida and Connecticut were first surveyed in May 1996, before their teenagers had entered the licensing systems and before these new requirements were in place, about their views of the new licensing programs. These 15 year-olds were in the first group of new drivers that would be affected by the law changes. Parents overwhelmingly endorsed the new licensing systems even though there was recognition that they and their teenagers would be inconvenienced to some extent (Williams *et al.*, 1998). It is of interest to determine parents' opinions now that these laws have been in place for several years and the first cohort of teenagers has experienced the new provisions. Thus, an attempt was made to interview the same parents that were first surveyed in 1996 again in 1999, after most of their teenagers would have obtained driver's licenses.

METHODS

In the 1996 survey (Williams et al., 1998), a random sample of telephone numbers of parents of 15 year-olds in Florida and Connecticut was obtained from Genesys Sampling Systems, and calls were made until 400 interviews were completed in Connecticut and 500 in Florida. This national database contains more than 80 percent of all households in these states. In this study, an attempt was made to contact the original households and, wherever possible, talk to the same parents as in the 1996 survey. Telephone calls were made during February and March 1999.

Of the 400 parents contacted in Connecticut in 1996, 52 were unreachable in 1999 because, for example, there was no answer or the number was disconnected or was now a business or fax/modem line. Another 56 likely were not the same families that had been reached in 1996; they said either they did not have a teenager in the household, there was no appropriate head of household, or they did not recall answering the original survey. Of the remaining 292 respondents, 67 refused to participate, and 1 person began but did not complete the survey. An additional 28 were not interviewed because of language problems (3) or an inability to contact them on callback (25). A total of 196 parents completed the survey, 113 mothers and 83 fathers. Ninety percent of these surveys were with the same parent as in the 1996 survey.

Of the 500 parents contacted in Florida in 1996, 85 were unreachable in 1999 because, for example, there was no answer or the number was disconnected or was now a business or fax/modem line. Another 103 likely were not the same families that had been reached in 1996; they said either they did not have a teenager in household, there was no appropriate head of household, or they did not recall answering the original survey. Of the remaining 312 respondents, 65 refused to participate, and 1 person began but did not complete the survey. An additional 30 were not interviewed because of language problems (6) or an inability to contact them on callback (24). A total of 216 parents completed the survey, 136 mothers and 80 fathers. Ninety-four percent of these surveys were with the same parent as in the 1996 survey.

RESULTS

At the time of the 1999 survey, parents indicated that almost all of their teenagers held driver's licenses, 88 percent in Florida and 89 percent in Connecticut. Table I shows parents' opinions of the elements of graduated licensing before and after they had gained experience with the provisions of the new laws. In 1996, when their teenagers were 15 years old, more than 90 percent of parents in each state supported a required minimum period of supervised driving before a teenager gets a license; in 1999, this increased significantly to 99 percent of parents in both states (Florida: $\chi^2=6.8$, $p=0.034$; Connecticut: $\chi^2=12.8$, $p=0.002$). When asked how long the permit period should be, most parents supported the 6-month period currently in place in both states (65 percent in Florida and 83 percent in Connecticut). More parents in 1999 than in 1996 also supported night driving restrictions (Table I), although in Florida this difference was not significant. In Florida, where such restrictions are in place for 16 and 17 year-olds, 92 percent of parents supported them. When asked when the nighttime restriction should start for 16 year-olds, there was very little change in opinion since 1996, with more than half the Florida parents agreeing with the 11 p.m. restriction currently in place (58 percent). However, more than half the parents in Florida (58 percent) also indicated that when their teenagers were first licensed they imposed an even earlier night driving restriction than the one required by the law (11 p.m. for 16 year-olds, 1 a.m. for 17 year-olds). Seventy-nine percent of them said their teenagers had to be home before 11 p.m.

In Connecticut, where there is no night driving restriction for beginning drivers, 85 percent of parents in 1999 said they would support such a restriction compared with 80 percent in 1996 ($\chi^2=5.9$, $p=0.05$) (Table I). The majority of parents supported a restriction starting at 11 p.m. or earlier (79 percent), but more parents in 1999 than in 1996 (21 vs. 11 percent) thought the restriction should begin at midnight or later (Table III). Most parents (80 percent) indicated they imposed their own nighttime driving restrictions when their teenagers were first licensed; 28 percent of

teenagers had to be home by 10 p.m., 78 percent before midnight.

Overall, there was less support for restrictions on teenage passengers than for night driving restrictions (Table I). However, there was significantly more support in 1999 than there had been in 1996, with about two-thirds of parents in each state now favoring a passenger restriction compared with about 50 percent in 1996 (Florida: $\chi^2=7.9$, $p=0.02$; Connecticut: $\chi^2=8.4$, $p=0.02$). Although neither state requires it, many parents indicated they imposed their own restrictions on teenage passengers. In Florida, almost half the parents said they restricted teenage passengers when their teenagers were first licensed, and 30 percent said they did not allow their newly licensed teenagers to have any passengers. In Connecticut, about two-thirds of parents said they restricted the number of teenage passengers, and 37 percent said they would not allow other teenagers.

Graduated licensing systems typically result in raising the age at which teenagers can obtain full-privilege licenses to drive anywhere, anytime. Parents were asked how old teenagers should be before being allowed to get full-privilege driver's licenses. Fewer parents in 1999 than in 1996 thought 16 or younger is an appropriate age (54 vs. 43 percent in Florida; 30 vs. 14 percent in Connecticut), with about one-quarter of parents in each state preferring that a full-privilege license not be granted until at least age 18 (Florida: overall $\chi^2=11.4$, $p=0.02$; Connecticut: overall $\chi^2=31.7$, $p<0.0001$).

Tables II-IV show parents' opinions in Florida and Connecticut concerning the new licensing laws. In Florida, significantly fewer parents in 1999 than in 1996 rate the new licensing system as good or excellent in preparing their children to drive (64 vs. 85 percent)

($\chi^2=26.4$, $p<0.0001$) (Table II). And although the overwhelming majority of parents agreed that "the new law is an improvement over the old law," they were significantly less likely in 1999 than in 1996 to agree with this statement ($\chi^2=9.2$, $p=0.01$) (Table III). In Connecticut, there was no significant change in parents' views about the adequacy of the new licensing system, with about three-quarters of parents in 1996 and 1999 rating the new system as good or excellent. Parents also were somewhat more likely to say the new law is an improvement over the old law ($\chi^2=10.3$, $p=0.006$). There was a significant change in parents' attitudes about how difficult it should be for young people to get their first driver's licenses, with about 40 percent of parents in Florida and Connecticut in 1999 who thought the laws should be even more difficult than they already are compared with about 25 percent in 1996 (Florida: $\chi^2=23.3$, $p=0.0001$; Connecticut: $\chi^2=30.7$, $p<0.001$) (Table IV).

Why do some parents seem less satisfied with the law now than before? The inconvenience of having to transport their teenagers seems unlikely to be a factor in the reduced support for the new licensing system in Florida. Twenty-eight percent of Florida parents in 1996 thought the new law would inconvenience them, however only 18 percent in 1999 reported that it did ($\chi^2=5.6$, $p=0.06$) (Table VI). Also, very few Florida parents in 1999 said the law had made it harder for their teenagers to get jobs (17 percent). Connecticut parents reported their teenagers were a lot less inconvenienced by the law than they had anticipated. Not only were they significantly less likely to say that the new licensing law inconvenienced them ($\chi^2=37.4$, $p<0.0001$), but fewer of them reported that it made it harder to get jobs than they had anticipated ($\chi^2=39.8$, $p<0.001$).

TABLE I Support for Limits on Initial Driving by Teenagers Before and After Law Changes

	Percent of Parents			
	Florida		Connecticut	
	1996	1999	1996	1999
Minimum period supervised driving	94	99	92	99
Night driving restrictions	90	92	80	85
Passenger restrictions	56	67	58	72
Graduated licensing with all of the above provisions	54	63	52	67

TABLE II How Good a Job Do Your State's Licensing Requirements Do in Making Sure Young People Are Adequate Drivers When First Licensed? Before and After Law Changes

	Percent of Parents			
	Florida		Connecticut	
	1996	1999	1996	1999
Excellent	12	8	9	7
Good	73	56	68	67
Not good or poor	11	31	17	21
Don't know	5	5	6	4

TABLE III Effectiveness of New Laws Before and After Law Changes

	Percent of Parents			
	Florida		Connecticut	
	1996	1999	1996	1999
Will/Has made teens better, safer drivers	80	55	78	67
Will/Did inconvenience parents	28	18	58	28
Will/Has made it much harder for teens to get to school and job	25	17	46	18
Will/Has reduced crashes and injuries	69	33	72	40
Is an improvement over old law	89	80	85	91

TABLE IV How Difficult Should It Be for Young People to Get Their First Driver's License? Before and After Law Changes

	Percent of Parents			
	Florida		Connecticut	
	1996	1999	1996	1999
More difficult than new law	25	45	26	40
New law is about right	61	50	58	58
Old law is about right	7	3	12	1
Less difficult than old law	2	<1	2	0

A more likely factor in parent's decreased satisfaction with the new law in Florida was their perception of the law's safety benefits. Parents in Florida, and to a lesser extent in Connecticut, were less likely in 1999 than in 1996 to agree that the current law had made teenagers safer, better drivers (Florida: $\chi^2=34.2$, $p<0.001$; Connecticut: $\chi^2=13.5$, $p<0.001$) or that the current law had reduced crashes or injuries (Florida: $\chi^2=61.9$, $p<0.0001$; Connecticut: $\chi^2=73.1$, $p<0.0001$) (Table III). Before the law was in place, 80 percent of Florida parents thought it would make teenagers better drivers. Following their experience with the law, only 55 percent of parents agreed that the law had in

fact contributed to the safety of teenage drivers. Likewise only a third of Florida parents in 1999 thought the law had reduced crashes and injuries compared with about two-thirds of parents in 1996 who thought it would. These perceptions are strongly related to their attitudes about the laws. Parents who do not believe the new laws have resulted in fewer crashes or safer, better drivers were far more likely to say the laws should be tougher than they already are. Only about a third of Florida parents who agreed that the laws had improved safety believed the laws should be made more difficult, compared with about two-thirds of parents who did not agree safety had improved.

CONCLUSIONS

Graduated licensing systems are designed to improve safety among beginning drivers, but they also reduce mobility and may inconvenience teenagers and their parents. Public acceptance of these programs is very important to ensure compliance with the restrictions and support for the laws, as well as to encourage other states to follow suit. Results of this study suggest the effects on mobility are limited, with few parents reporting any inconvenience for themselves or their teenagers. Furthermore, support for the new laws is high. Parents in Florida and Connecticut, whose teenagers were among the first to obtain their driver's licenses under the new, more stringent licensing systems, were even more supportive of the restrictions after experiencing the provisions of the new laws than before. Many of them favored enactment of additional restrictions not currently in effect in their states, such as teenage passenger restrictions and night driving restrictions (not currently required in Connecticut), and would like the laws to be even more difficult for beginning drivers than currently. In Connecticut, where night driving restrictions were debated but removed from the bill, more parents in 1999 than in 1996 supported such restrictions, and the overwhelming majority of them said they imposed their own restrictions when their teenagers were first licensed.

One limitation of this study should be mentioned. Many of the parents who originally were contacted in 1996 could not be reached in 1999, and a few did not want to be interviewed a second time. Because results are reported only for those parents interviewed on both occasions, the comparison data in this study are valid. However, the sample of parents interviewed in 1999 may be different in a number of important ways than those interviewed only in 1996. For example, less stable families might be more difficult to contact at a later date because they may change residences more often. Factors such as these may bias the sample and limit its generalizability. However, a comparison of survey responses among all the parents who had been interviewed in 1996 with those interviewed both in 1996 and 1999 showed that the responses to survey

questions for the most part were not significantly different among these two groups.

Neither Florida nor Connecticut restricts newly licensed drivers from transporting teenage passengers. However, parents in both states were much more supportive of teenage passenger restrictions after their teenagers had gone through the licensing process, and many of them said they imposed their own restrictions. Transporting teenage passengers has been shown to increase crash risk among teenage drivers during both the day and night (Chen *et al.*, 2000; Doherty *et al.*, 1998; Preusser *et al.*, 1998), prompting some states to adopt teenage passenger restrictions for newly licensed drivers. Since 1998, 15 states have adopted such restrictions.

Although many parents in Florida and Connecticut said they do not believe the laws have made their teenagers safer drivers, they have no way to compare their teenagers' driving records or skills with what they might have been if licensed under the old laws. Plus, their experience with the system's broader impact is limited. A growing number of studies indicate graduated licensing laws are effective in reducing crashes (Langley *et al.*, 1996; Ulmer *et al.*, 2000). A recent study in Florida (Ulmer *et al.*, 2000) found a 9 percent reduction in fatal and injury crash involvements among 15–17 year-olds during 1997, the first full year of graduated licensing. In Connecticut, the new licensing requirements resulted in a 22 percent decline in fatal/injury crash involvements of 16-year-old drivers during the first full year of the program (Ulmer *et al.*, in press).

The overall results of this survey indicate parents agree with the increased licensing restrictions in Florida and Connecticut that went into effect in 1996 and 1997, and many parents want further restrictions. This should encourage other states to proceed with graduated licensing systems or to augment systems already in place.

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