It is well known that young drivers have higher crash rates than drivers of other ages. Less recognized is that the age group most affected by licensing policies—16-year-olds—has by far the highest crash risk of drivers of any age. Nationally, the crash risk per mile driven by 16 year-olds is twice that of 19-year-olds and about seven times the risk of drivers ages 40-59. The fatal crash type most often associated with teenage drivers, especially 16-year-olds, is a single-vehicle, run-off-the-road collision involving speeding and multiple teenage passengers. Immaturity and lack of driving experience are the main reasons. Compared with older drivers, teenagers as a group are more willing to take risks and less likely to use safety belts. They also are more likely than older drivers to underestimate the dangers associated with hazardous situations and less able to cope with such dangers.

Clearly, the methods the country has relied on in the past to reduce injuries associated with young drivers have not worked. Driver education continues to enjoy wide popular appeal, yet it is not the answer. A 1994 report to Congress by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration cited general agreement among experts that current novice driver education programs are not producing safer young drivers. Another decade of research has not changed this conclusion. While a good education course, emphasizing on-the-road driving, can teach basic vehicle control skills, extensive research indicates that high school driver education does not lead to lower crash involvement compared with other ways of learning to drive. Attitudes, decision-making skills, risk-taking tendencies, and other factors contribute to crashes and may not be affected much by driver education. Tougher penalty systems for young drivers, by themselves, have limited effects.

For most of the 20th century, states across the nation generally offered a quick and easy path to a full-privilege license at a very young age. This policy allowed the combined effects of driving inexperience and youthfulness to take their toll. But beginning with Florida in 1996, states started changing their strategies by adopting new systems of graduated licensing, under which full privileges are phased in over time so that beginners get their initial driving experience in lower risk settings. They gain on-the-road experience but are protected while doing so, first in a supervised learner’s phase and then in an intermediate licensing phase during which unsupervised driving is allowed but not in high-risk settings—for example, late at night or with other teens in the car. Progress through these stages without incurring traffic violations or crashes leads to full-privilege licensure. The phase-in process takes some time, so young people are not only more experienced but also somewhat older and more mature when they earn full privileges.

According to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, several studies have shown no difference in crash rates between teenagers who took school-based driver education classes and those who did not. Some studies have even suggested that partaking in a driver education course could increase the chances that a newly licensed driver will have a motor vehicle crash or violation, as such programs tend to provide insufficient practice and, in some states, participation in such programs reduces the age at which a teenager can begin driving alone when completion of such courses provides an opportunity for early licensure.¹

Research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s National Center for Injury Prevention and Control suggests that driver education programs may be improved by “teaching psychomotor, perceptual, and cognitive skills that are critical for safe driving, and by addressing inexperience, risky behaviors, and other age-related factors that increase the crash risk among young drivers.”² However, no research to date has demonstrated that such approaches are effective.


The aim is not to reduce the quantity of driving, especially in the learner phase. In fact, it is important for supervised beginners in a graduated system to drive as much as possible in as many circumstances as possible before they get their intermediate licenses. Starting with less challenging circumstances such as learning basic maneuvers in a parking lot, novices then graduate to driving on local roads and more busy thoroughfares. They also should gain experience on freeways, in bad weather, and at night. The aim is to reduce the crash risk that results from driving inexperience. In allowing some types of driving but not others, graduated licensing represents a compromise between safety and mobility.

Driving at night is a high-risk activity for people of all ages, but especially the very youngest drivers. The driving task is more difficult when it is dark, and other higher risk driving situations, generally associated with recreational activities like driving around with friends or to and from parties, are more likely to occur at night. In response to a survey asking teenagers to describe their dangerous driving situations during the past six months ("if a cop had been there you probably would have been stopped"), the teens reported that the majority of such incidents occurred after 10 p.m. Fatigue and alcohol are more likely to contribute to crashes during nighttime hours. According to federal crash data, the fatal crash risk for 16- to 17-year-olds during the 9 p.m. to 6 a.m. period is about three times the daytime risk.

Another major risk factor for teenage drivers is the presence of passengers, especially teen passengers. For older drivers, passenger presence either has no effect on crash risk or decreases it, but for young drivers passengers greatly magnify the risk. That is, teenagers' already high crash risk when driving alone increases dramatically when passengers are added. This effect is present both at night and during the day and is further heightened if the passengers are teenagers—the more teens in the car the greater the risk. With three or more passengers, the fatal crash risk for 16 and 17-year-old drivers on U.S. roads is about three times as high as when driving alone.

The reasons are obvious. The social dynamic in a vehicle occupied by several teenagers can be distracting to beginning drivers who need to pay close attention to the driving task. Plus, the presence of peers in the car often induces young drivers to take risks, perhaps because they are trying to impress their friends or because they are goaded into it. In the survey asking teens to describe dangerous driving situations during the past six months, 85 percent of the reported incidents involved one or more peers as passengers in the vehicle.

The focus of research is usually on young drivers, but many teenagers die as passengers in motor vehicle crashes. Sixty-two percent of teenage passenger deaths in 2004 occurred in crashes in which another teenager was driving. Teenagers far exceed all other age groups in terms of per-capita deaths as both drivers and passengers, but their fatality rates as passengers are about five times higher than those of passengers who are 35 to 59 years old. Among teenage drivers, 16-year-olds have by far the highest rates of teenage passenger death. While parents often worry about the risks of their teens as drivers, they do not as often consider the higher risks of dying as passengers in other teens' vehicles.

Driving to and from school also can be a time of much higher risk. An Institute analysis of weekday crashes of 16- and 17-year-olds during the 9-month school year indicated wide variations in crash counts by time of day. During 2001-03, the largest number of crashes (about 166,000 nationwide) occurred from 3 to 4 p.m., when teenagers were leaving school. Another 123,000 crashes occurred during the 7 a.m. hour, as teens were driving to school. A small peak (about 69,000 crashes) occurred at lunchtime. No such patterns were apparent during the summer months when teenagers were out of school.

School lunch policies in some communities contribute to the problem. A recent study by researchers at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine found that crash rates during lunch were about three times higher in counties that had open lunch periods compared with another county that did not. The study found that vehicle occupancy was higher in the crashes in the open lunch policy counties than the comparison county. Young drivers who go out for lunch often take along their friends, which increases the risks. The study was conducted in 2002, before North Carolina began restricting the number of passengers in vehicles driven by beginners. Now young beginners are not allowed to drive with more than one passenger who is younger than 21 and not a member of the driver's family.

To most people, graduated licensing makes sense. Parents strongly favor it. After all, driving is such a complex skill that it cannot be learned overnight or in a few short weeks. It's like learning any other complex skill. It's learned under supervised conditions, and initial experience is limited to lower-risk settings. This is no different in principle from mastering other skills where performance errors can have serious consequences such as rock climbing or piloting a plane. We wouldn't think of letting a newly licensed pilot fly solo the first time with a plane full of passengers.

Since 1996, all but a handful of states have adopted some form of graduated licensing. These systems vary substantially in terms of the provisions and duration of the licensing stages and other features, but most incorporate at least six months of practice driving before an initial license is issued. Many also have night driving restrictions and restrictions on teen passengers during the first six to 12 months of licensure.

With most states having enacted some legislation, Phase I of graduated licensing is basically over. Fifteen states have strengthened their original laws, and additional legislation is anticipated. However, little action has occurred since 2003, so the gradu-
uald licensing movement appears to be winding down. It would be unfortunate if attention to the young driver problem shifts after this initial legislative flurry. In Canada, where most provinces adopted graduated systems during the past decade, a recent public opinion poll found that “the majority of Canadian drivers are not concerned about young driver safety.”

An outbreak of teenage crash deaths in late 2004 in the Washington, DC area—18 deaths in 11 weeks—provides an illustration of the remaining problem. All three local jurisdictions (DC, Maryland, and Virginia) have three-stage graduated systems rated good by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. In Maryland it was increased attention to these deaths that prompted the state to pass stiffer restrictions, thus earning the good rating. It is a sad, but well-recognized fact that a rash of teenage deaths sometimes is needed to arouse public concern and direct greater attention to this issue.

There are two main ways to make further progress in the United States. One is to delay licensure; the other is to provide additional protected experience. Both of these goals can be accomplished by building on existing graduated licensing systems. It’s time for Phase II to begin.

**Graduated Licensing Systems—Phase II**

Obviously, one way to delay licensure is simply to raise the minimum licensing age to 17 or 18. The United States is one of a few countries that allow 16-year-olds to get licenses, and in some countries licensing exams are much harder to pass than in the United States. The exams can also be expensive, which inhibits and delays licensure. In the United States, where mobility is prized and getting a license at 16 is considered by many to be a rite of passage, it would be a hard sell to try to delay the licensing age. Raising it to 17 or older has been considered by legislators in some states, but none have come close to following New Jersey—the only state currently to delay licensing until age 17.

Graduated licensing makes sense even for older beginning teenage drivers, who still have elevated crash rates, and in some countries beginners of all ages are subject to graduated systems. Licensure delay also can and is being achieved by increasing the age at which learner’s permits may be obtained and extending the requirements during this stage. For example, beginners in Kentucky used to be eligible for full licenses a month after their 16th birthday, but now beginners have to wait until they are 16 to obtain a learner’s permit. Then the permit must be held for a minimum of 6 months, so licensing is delayed until at least 16 years, 6 months. Connecticut and a few other states have similar policies.

Studies suggest that delaying licensure of 16-year-olds can reduce crashes because drivers who are supervised have very few crashes. Other states could make similar gains by raising the permit age to 16 and/or extending the minimum learner’s stage, which also would allow for accumulation of additional protected driving experience. More modest shifts in the minimum permit age also can delay licensure. For example, California recently raised the permit age from 15 to 15 years, 6 months. A permit must be held for at least 6 months, and a license can be obtained at 16. This change can be expected to produce an increase in the age at which California teenagers get their licenses, because many teens will not obtain the learner’s permit when they’re first eligible.

The amount of protected driving experience gained in a graduated system can be maximized by both extending the learner’s stage and toughening the restrictions governing initial licensed driving. Studies around the world have found the supervised learner stage to be quite safe. Upon licensure, crash risk increases dramatically and then decreases during the subsequent few months. This risk profile is thought to be related largely to driving experience. The unique feature of graduated licensing is that it keeps new licensees out of very high-risk situations during the most vulnerable months of driving, while encouraging the accumulation of mileage in lower risk settings. However, nighttime and passenger restrictions are absent or weak in many states. Thirty-eight states have night driving restrictions, but 23 of them do not start until midnight or 1 a.m., thus bypassing the high-risk late evening hours when the majority of nighttime crashes occur. In 2004, 64 percent of fatal crashes among 16-year-old drivers and 70 percent of all crashes occurring during the 9 p.m.–5 a.m. period took place before midnight. Fewer states (27) have passenger restrictions, and several of these restrictions allow as many as three passengers, which is a very high-risk scenario for young drivers.

No state has what would be considered an excellent system—a minimum age of 16 for the learner’s permit, a required permit-holding period of at least 6 months, a nighttime restriction starting at 9 or 10 p.m., and a restriction allowing no more than one young passenger, with both nighttime and
passenger restrictions in force until age 18. These rules are not beyond reach. Each of them exists in several states, but no state has put all of the rules together for a comprehensive graduated system.

Besides these changes, other adjustments are needed because some licensing systems have features that hamper their effectiveness. For example, in Kentucky there is the illogical combination of a restriction on late-night practice driving in the learner’s stage, but no such restriction upon licensure. As a result, new drivers accumulate no supervised experience during the most hazardous driving time. And in many states where driver education is optional, beginners who complete courses are given special privileges—for example, shorter learner’s periods or being allowed to drive during restricted nighttime hours at an earlier age. This defeats the purpose of graduated licensing, and because driver education is known not to produce safer drivers, it isn’t justified.

Graduated licensing laws can be modified in other ways. For example, seat belt use generally is lower among teenage drivers and passengers than adults. North Carolina has explicit belt use requirements and penalties in its graduated system, requiring belt use by all vehicle occupants, and provides a model for other states. Eleven jurisdictions have banned cell phone use by drivers in graduated systems. New Jersey also applies its graduated licensing law to older novices, except that the nighttime and passenger restrictions are waived for new drivers 21 and older. The typical policy is to cover only drivers younger than 18, who are the highest risk beginners, but older novices also have heightened crash risk.

Compliance with graduated licensing laws is key to their effectiveness. We know from research that although teens comply somewhat with the night and passenger restrictions, noncompliance is widespread, especially violations of passenger provisions. Research is proceeding on ways to get parents more involved in the licensing process, both in providing comprehensive learning experiences and in enforcing existing rules and creating their own. In the absence of state requirements, most parents set up their own rules about where, when, and with whom their children can travel. Pressure from their teenage children may limit this, but it’s much easier for parents to manage this difficult period if the state imposes sensible requirements for phasing in full driving privileges.

Police and parents could do more to enforce graduated licensing laws. Surveys suggest that police officers are not routinely enforcing these laws. Furthermore, focus groups have indicated that although parents understand they are the primary enforcers, they want police involved to validate and bolster their efforts.

Newspaper headlines about teenage crash deaths in the DC area included “As Dreams Die Young, Answers are Elusive.” Actually the answers are not elusive. Graduated licensing has proven to be popular and successful in the United States. Extending it would achieve further substantial gains. These would come at the expense of some mobility, and societies have to decide where they want to strike the balance between mobility for young people and safety concerns for everyone on the road, including teenagers. This is not necessarily an obvious choice. Implementing Phase II of graduated licensing depends on how seriously we as a society take the problem of deaths and injuries associated with young drivers.

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.Solutions: The greater the accessibility, the more vigilance is required. This applies to all locations, including cafeterias. Escape routes are critical, as are communication devices to call for help. If screening occurs at some distance from the cafeteria, there is less likelihood of an offender reaching this destination undetected. A locked or supervised breezeway might have deterred Kip Kinkel from his chosen route. Other group gathering spaces, including gymnasiums and theaters, have similar vulnerabilities. To deter intentional food contamination, schools can position open food service areas and beverage dispensers near cash registers and teachers’ tables to increase natural surveillance. Security cameras in these areas can add additional deterrence.

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4 Ibid.
6 Kaufman et al., 1999.