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Young Driver Safety: Continuing Progress on the Road to Zero

By Pam Shadel Fischer, Senior Director of External Engagement, Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA)

Introduction by NTLC Staff—Motor vehicle crashes remain a leading cause of death among teenagers, and prosecutors can play a meaningful role in prevention, not just enforcement. By engaging with their communities through driver education classes, school events, youth programs, and traffic safety partnerships, prosecutors can help teens understand the real-world consequences of risky driving and reinforce the importance of making safe choices behind the wheel. This month's article focuses on strategies for promoting teen driver safety through education, community engagement, and proactive prevention efforts aimed at reducing crashes before they occur.

Did you know that young drivers, aged 15 to 20, have the highest crash risk of any age group on the road? They're three times more likely than drivers 20 and older to be involved in a fatal crash.¹ Why? Quite simply, young drivers are immature and

¹ Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. (2025, August). Teenagers. [Web page]. www.iihs.org/topics/teenagers

inexperienced. The prefrontal cortex—the part of the brain responsible for impulse inhibition, decision-making, and judgment—doesn't fully mature until the early to mid-twenties.² As a result, young drivers are less likely than their older counterparts to recognize risk. In fact, some teens even seek it.

Driving is a learned activity that takes practice. Building the muscle memory needed to help a driver react quickly and appropriately in a variety of situations takes time. This explains the root cause of most novice driver crashes—the teen simply doesn't have the skills or experience needed to recognize a hazard and take corrective action. Researchers point to driver error as the most prevalent reason, with recognition (e.g., inadequate surveillance, distraction) and decision errors (e.g., following too closely, driving too fast for conditions) topping the list.³

Since the mid-1990s, states have addressed this problem by enacting stringent teen driver licensing requirements known as Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) programs. Memorialized in law, GDL programs typically require teens to participate in a three-step system that includes: a supervised learner's permit period; an intermediate phase that allows a novice to drive unsupervised but with restrictions that address high-risk situations (driving late at night and with peer passengers, driving impaired or distracted); and, finally, licensure with full privileges.

This structure is consistent among the states, but the GDL requirements can vary significantly. For example, some states allow teens to begin the program as early as age 14, while others restrict entry until the teen is at least 16 years of age. The length of each stage, along with the restrictions, also vary, creating a patchwork of GDL programs across the U.S. While numerous studies have confirmed that GDL significantly reduces novice driver crashes with declines ranging from 20% to 40%, states with strong restrictions on nighttime driving and teen passengers, as well as a delayed licensure age, have fewer young driver fatal crashes and insurance losses.^{4,5}

Half of the states' GDL programs also require teens to complete driver education (classroom instruction and/or behind-the-wheel training), and a handful mandate that parents/guardians participate in an orientation program before their teens may obtain a permit. Numerous studies confirm that both are critical for helping to reduce young driver crash risk. In Oregon, for example, teens who completed an approved driver education course had fewer crashes, convictions and suspensions compared to their peers who did not.⁶ While a study of Nebraska teens who completed driver education revealed similar findings, along with reductions in alcohol-involved convictions during the first two years of licensure.⁷

Teens are also less likely to crash and violate the law if they have parents who set, monitor and enforce safe driving practices. These "authoritative" parents who set high expectations and nurture their young drivers see their teens more likely to drive safely at far greater rates than teens with permissive or uninvolved parents.⁸

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² Shope, J. T. (2006). Influences on youthful driving behavior and their potential for guiding interventions to reduce crashes. *Injury Prevention*, 9–14.

³ Curry, A. E., Hafetz, J., Kallan, M. J., Winston, F. K., & Durbin, D. R. (2011). Prevalence of teen driver errors leading to serious motor vehicle crashes. *Accident Analysis & Prevention*, 43(4), 1285–1290.

⁴ Williams, A. F. (2011). Commentary: Graduated licensing—Moving forward or standing still? *Traffic Injury Prevention*, 12(3), 207–209. pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/21660883/

⁵ IIHS. (2025, August). Teenagers.

⁶ Raymond, P., Johns, M., Golembiewski, G., Seifer, R. F., Nichols, J., & Knoblauch, R. (2007). Traffic safety facts. *Evaluation of Oregon's graduated driver licensing program* [DOT HS 810 830]. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. www.govinfo.gov/app/details/GOVPUB-TD8-PURL-LPS102183

⁷ Shell, D. F., Newman, I. M., Cordova-Cazar, A. L., & Heese, J. M. (2015). Driver education and teen crashes and traffic violations in the first two years of driving in a graduated licensing system. *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 82: 45–52.

⁸ Center for Injury Prevention and Research. (2009). *Driving through the eyes of teens, A closer look*, second in a series of teen driver safety issues. injury.research.chop.edu/sites/default/files/documents/driving_through_the_eyes_of_teens_a_closer_look_reduced.pdf

Young Driver Safety: Continuing Progress on the Road to Zero

Non-GDL-related initiatives, particularly peer-to-peer traffic safety education programs, have garnered support from the behavioral safety-focused State Highway Safety Offices (SHSOs). Some SHSOs have developed and implemented their own programs that address the behavioral safety issues typically associated with young driver crashes—consumption of alcohol and/or drugs, distraction caused by cell phones and other teen passengers, drowsiness, late-night driving, low seat belt use, and speeding. Other SHSOs provide grant funding to organizations with expertise in delivering novice driver interventions, such as SADD, FCCLA and Teens in the Driver Seat, among others. Teens who regularly participate in these peer-led programs are less likely to engage in risky behaviors.⁹

Are these initiatives having a positive impact? According to a Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) [analysis](#) of Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) data for 2001 through 2021, young driver fatal crashes and crash rates fell 38% and 34%, respectively. This compares to a 7.5% increase in fatal crashes and an 11.6% decrease in the crash rates for drivers aged 21 and older during the same period.¹⁰ Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic had a deadly impact on road safety in the U.S. that included an unprecedented uptick in teen driver-involved fatalities.¹¹

According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), young drivers involved in fatal crashes spiked 14% from 3,999 in 2019 to 4,561 in 2020.¹² The increase continued in 2021 (5,088), fell in 2022 (4,856), and rose again in 2023 to 5,133, with the latter the most current year for which data is available. However, early data for 2024 showed a mixed bag for teen drivers, with some states reporting increases in fatalities and others reporting declines. Overall, U.S. traffic fatalities fell nearly 4% to 39,345.¹³



Source: Federal Highway Administration

Building on the gains made in reducing young driver crashes and fatalities over the past two decades is essential for achieving the U.S. roadway safety goal of zero fatalities. Some (including this author) might even suggest that this age group—more than any other—has the greatest potential for reaching this milestone first. But what will it take to get there? Building on the four proven countermeasures discussed earlier, along with two others—vehicle technology and driver responsibility—is essential. These countermeasures support the six principles of the Safe System approach (see the graphic), the foundation of the U.S. *National Roadway Strategy* widely adopted by states, safety organizations, businesses and other entities. They also align with three of the five safe system elements—Safe Roads Users, Safe Speeds, Safe Vehicles—which together create layers of protection to help keep young drivers and those they share the road with safe.

⁹ Varenhorst, B. B. (2004). Tapping the power of peer helping. *Reclaiming Children and Youth: The Journal of Strength-based Interventions*, 13(3), 130-133.

¹⁰ Fischer, P. S., & Retting, R. (2023, October). GHSA Spotlight Report. *Young drivers and traffic fatalities: 20 years of progress on the road to zero*. Governors Highway Safety Association. www.ghsa.org/resource-hub/young-drivers-20-years-progress

¹¹ Tefft, B.C. (2024). *Traffic safety impact of the COVID-19 pandemic: Fatal crashes in 2020–2022* [Research Brief]. AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. newsroom.aaa.com/asset/traffic-safety-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-fatal-crashes-in-2020-2022/

¹² National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (2022, June). Traffic safety facts. *Young drivers: 2020*. [DOT HS 813 313]. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. www.nhtendrivers.com/downloads/2020-YOUNG-DRIVERS-Traffic-Safety-Fact-Sheet.pdf

¹³ National Center for Statistics and Analysis. (2025, April). Traffic safety facts. *Early estimate of motor vehicle traffic fatalities in 2024*. [DOT HS 813 710]. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813710

To continue this progress, states must work with traffic safety professionals to:

Strengthen state GDL laws. Current best practice calls for a minimum permit age of 16, which includes 70 hours of supervised practice and an intermediate license age of 17. During the latter phase, the nighttime driving restriction should start at 8 p.m. and no teen passengers should be permitted in the vehicle.¹⁴ This may sound draconian, but the restrictions are grounded in research. Currently, no state meets these criteria. (Learn how stronger nighttime driving and passenger laws could impact fatality and collision rates by state by using the [IIHS GDL Calculator](#).)

Increase parent engagement. Parents and guardians play a pivotal role in their teen's learning to drive experience and need to understand and enforce their state's GDL provisions. But surveys confirm parental awareness is low, with many relying on their teens for this information. Building a parent education component (i.e., an orientation) into state GDL can help bridge this knowledge gap. The focus should be on helping parents understand how GDL works to address young driver crash risk, and that the provisions in their state law are the minimum standard to exceed, not a guideline or maximum to aim for. Once parents understand this, they are more likely to view GDL as a supportive program rather than a government dictate. This is critical because GDL is designed to help parents help their teens survive their most dangerous driving years.

Require high-quality, accessible driver education. The results of the three-decade-long DeKalb County study, released in the mid-80s, prompted many states to cut funding for novice driver education and some to eliminate the requirement. But recent research suggests these programs positively impact novice driver safety, particularly when tied to GDL. In addition to states mandating driver education and training, they must ensure that what is provided meets the needs of these high-risk drivers. This starts with implementing the national Novice Teen Driver Education and Training Standards, which recommend a comprehensive 45-hour classroom and 10-hour behind-the-wheel curriculum. Coupled with that, states need to eliminate the financial barriers that prevent some teens from enrolling in this training. When cost is prohibitive, teens are forced to wait until they are 18 to get a driver's license, which means they are not realizing the benefits of GDL. States can learn from initiatives established in Ohio, Washington and Wisconsin to address this disparity.

Parents and guardians play a pivotal role in their teen's learning to drive experience and need to understand and enforce their state's GDL provisions.

Invest in effective teen-led programs. Peer-to-peer education is a viable component of a broader teen traffic safety strategy, but not all programs are created equal. States should assess their own programs or those they are considering investing in to ensure they: are teen-led, inclusive, sustainable, positive, provide facilitated training, establish measurable objectives, offer meaningful incentives and recognition, and are regularly evaluated.¹⁵ These nine success indicators, determined through research and with guidance from an expert panel, are discussed in NHTSA's [Peer-to-Peer Teen Traffic Safety Program Guide](#).

Promote vehicle safety technology and monitoring apps. Choosing a vehicle is one of the most important decisions parents make for their young drivers. While an older vehicle may seem like the right choice given teens' crash risk, putting them in newer vehicles equipped with advanced driver assistance systems or ADAS is best. These safety features, such as lane departure warning, blind spot monitoring and automatic emergency braking among others, have the potential to prevent or mitigate up to 75% of teen driver fatal crashes.^{16,17}

¹⁴ IIHS. (2025, August). Teenagers.

¹⁵ Fischer, P. S. (2019, March). *Peer-to-peer teen traffic safety program guide*. [DOT HS 812 631]. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. www.ghsa.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/13905_peer2peerbrochure_031519_v4-blankpages-tag.pdf

¹⁶ IIHS. (2023). Young driver safety: A guide for parents of teens [Web page]. www.iihs.org/topics/teenagers/young-driver-safety

¹⁷ IIHS. (2021, September 21). Driving technology promises large safety benefits for teens [News release]. www.iihs.org/news/detail/driving-technology-promises-large-safety-benefits-for-teens

While this in-vehicle technology may be out of reach for some families, low or no-cost apps are a viable alternative for monitoring young drivers. Cell phones are ubiquitous among teens; using these devices to keep tabs on their driving is not difficult. For example, an app that notifies parents about nighttime driving violations could help them better enforce this restriction. The key is for parents to monitor these alerts and act when their young drivers violate restrictions.

Teach proper use of vehicle technology and emphasize responsibility. As vehicle technology continues to evolve, ensuring teens and their parents understand and use it correctly is critical. Research indicates that most drivers do not have a good understanding of the ADAS in their vehicles. Driver education and parent orientation programs are the ideal place to discuss the limitations of a particular system and the conditions or situations for which it is or isn't designed. Including electric vehicles is also recommended, given their ability to quickly accelerate and the danger they pose for a novice. That's because speed is a problem for young drivers, particularly as they get more comfortable behind the wheel. As a result, they account for a greater proportion of speed-related fatalities than older drivers.¹⁸ Education can help temper teens' enthusiasm to see how fast EVs can go. Driver education must also address the responsibility drivers have for the safety of people outside the vehicle—pedestrians, bicyclists, people in wheelchairs, scooter riders, and other road users.

In conclusion, young driver safety must be a priority in our quest to achieve zero traffic fatalities. Teens historically have been among the most dangerous drivers, so investing in their safety benefits all road users. This is best accomplished by continuing to leverage the proven countermeasures discussed earlier and advancing the six recommendations outlined above.

About the Author

Pam Shadel Fischer has been addressing behavioral safety issues at the local, state and national level for four decades and is one of the nation's leading experts on novice driving. She authored or contributed to many GHSA national reports, including eight addressing teen driver safety, and is the co-author of *Not So Fast: Parenting Your Teen Through the Dangers of Driving*, now in its third edition. Fischer is one of the architects of New Jersey's graduated driver license law, which includes the nation's only decal requirement, and leverages that experience to help other states identify gaps in their novice driver programs and implement proven and innovative countermeasures. She can be reached at pfischer@ghsa.org.



¹⁸ Retting, R., & Fischer, P. S. (2021, January). *Teens and speeding: Breaking the deadly cycle*. Governors Highway Safety Association. www.ghsa.org/sites/default/files/2025-03/GHSA_TeenSpeeding_Feb16.pdf