

Does Graduated Licensing Make Teens Safer Drivers or Just Postpone the Risk?

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Vehicle crashes are the [leading cause of death](#) for teenagers in the United States. That's why states no longer grant unrestricted driver's licenses to teens once they turn 16, as they did when I was a kid. Instead, states grant driving privileges to teenagers under 18 only after they have been driving under a permit with supervision for a lengthy period of time, and, even then, only by degrees. Driver's licenses issued to such teens typically restrict nighttime driving and/or the number of minors who may be present in the vehicle for some period of time after initial licensure. While many people readily accept the notion that teens are safer during the graduated licensing period--either because they aren't driving unsupervised at night, because they don't have a gaggle of friends in the car, or because they aren't driving at all given the hassle associated with becoming licensed--they wonder whether the effects vanish once the teens are on their own.

First, let's review North Carolina's graduated licensing law.

North Carolina requirements. To obtain a driver's license in North Carolina, a sixteen-year-old must:

1. Have held a limited learner's permit issued by NC DMV for at least 12 months;
2. Not have been convicted of a motor vehicle moving violation, a seat belt infraction, or a violation of the law prohibiting use of a mobile phone by drivers under 18 in the preceding six months;
3. Pass a road test administered by NC DMV
4. Have a high school diploma, a GED, or a driving eligibility certificate issued by a school administrator stating that (a) the person is currently enrolled in school and is making progress toward obtaining a high school diploma, (b) a substantial hardship would be placed on the person or his or her family if the person did not receive a certificate, or (c) the person cannot make progress toward obtaining a high school diploma or GED
5. Have completed a driving log detailing a minimum of 60 hours of driving, at least ten of them at night.

[G.S. 20-11\(d\)](#).

Even then, a sixteen-year-old is granted a limited provisional license, which permits unsupervised driving from 5:00 a.m. until 9:00 p.m. and at any time when driving to and from work. When the license holder is driving unsupervised, there may be no more than one passenger under age 21 in the vehicle. This limit does not apply to passengers who are members of the license holder's immediate family or who live in the same household with the driver. However, if a family member who is under 21 is in the vehicle, no non-family-member passengers who also are under 21 may be in the vehicle.

Failure to comply with the time-of-driving restriction constitutes operating a motor vehicle without a license, a Class 3 misdemeanor. G.S. 20-11(l). Failure to comply with the limitations on the number of passengers is an infraction, punishable by a fine of up to \$100.

A sixteen-year-old who has held a limited provisional license for six months may obtain a full provisional license if he or she:

1. Has not been convicted of a motor vehicle moving violation, a seat belt infraction, or a violation of the law prohibiting use of a mobile phone by drivers under 18 in the preceding six months,
2. Has a driving eligibility certificate, a high school diploma or GED, and
3. Has completed a driving log documenting at least 12 hours of driving, six of them at night.

The restrictions on time of driving, supervision, and passengers do not apply to a full provisional licensee. Such drivers are still prohibited from using mobile phones while driving, subject to the limited exceptions in [G.S. 20-137.3](#).

Are teens safer? North Carolina [was among the pioneers of graduated licensing](#), adopting, along with Georgia and Michigan, a full three-tier stage licensing system in 1997. [Parents love it](#), teens tolerate it, and researchers have concluded that North Carolina's system in particular is associated with a reduced crash risk for sixteen-year old drivers in the years following initial licensure. See Masten & Foss, [Long-term effect of the North Carolina graduated driver licensing system on licensed driver crash incidence: A 5-year survival analysis](#), 42 Accident Analysis & Prevention, 1647-1652 (stating that the findings "provide further evidence that crashing among young drivers is more commonly the result of what they have not yet learned than it is the result of the 'foolishness of youth.'")

Payback at 18? One comprehensive study has, however, associated graduated licensing with an increase in fatal crashes among 18-year-olds. See Masten, Foss & Marshall, [Graduated Licensing and Fatal Crashes Involving 16- to 19-Year-Old Drivers](#), 306/10 JAMA, 1098-1103 (concluding based on nationwide examination of fatal crash data that stronger graduated licensing programs were associated with substantially decreased fatal crash incidence for 16-year-old drivers but somewhat higher fatal crash incidence for 18-year-old drivers). The studies' authors posited that the amount learned under a graduated licensing program might not compare to what teens previously learned through experience alone. They noted that supervised driving is "co-driving, and some important lessons of experience, such as the need for self-regulation and what it means to be fully responsible for a vehicle, cannot be learned until teens begin driving alone." Another potential explanation is that graduated licensing leads some teens to skip the supervised driving component altogether, waiting until they are 18 to apply for and be issued an unrestricted license.

In any event, the authors of the study cautioned that fatal crashes (the only type of crash data for which evidence is available nationally) differ in significant ways from less serious crashes. For example, fatal crashes are more likely to involve high-risk behavior such as alcohol use and excessive speeding. Because graduated licensing programs are designed to "improve learning among novice drivers and to protect them from the consequences of their inexperience as they learn," rather than to "control the excessive behaviors often involved in fatal crashes," graduated licensing should only influence fatal crashes caused by lack of understanding versus misbehavior. Ultimately, the study concludes that more research is required to determine what accounts for the increase among 18-year-olds and how changes to licensing policy might reduce this association.