

Issue Brief

Reducing Teen Deaths in Kentucky: Graduated Driver's Licensing

Motor vehicle crashes are the number one cause of death to children over 1 year old. Teenagers face an especially high risk of death as a result of motor vehicle crashes as they reach driving age. Young drivers lack experience in responding to dangerous road conditions, and the numbers reflect that reality. Crash rates for 16-year-old drivers are three times higher than rates for 17-year-old drivers, five times higher than 18-year-old drivers, and twice as high as the rates for 85-year-old drivers.¹

The high crash rates impact more people than the drivers themselves. During 2004-2005, 106 drivers ages 16 and 17 were involved in fatal crashes, which claimed the lives of 121 Kentuckians.² Kentucky ranks 46th in the nation in the rate of teen drivers involved in fatal crashes.³

Teen deaths from motor vehicle crashes are neither an urban problem nor a rural problem in Kentucky. During 2000 through 2003, 424 Kentucky teens lost their lives due to motor vehicle crashes. Those teens came from 108 of Kentucky's 120 counties (see Table 1).

Graduated driver's licensing (GDL) laws have been implemented in many states to ease young drivers in to the responsibilities of driving. Kentucky currently has a minimal GDL system, simply requiring new drivers to hold a learner's permit for six months. Strengthening the graduated driver's license would allow teens to gain necessary driving experience and provide safe conditions to ease them in to full licensure.

What are the components of a model Graduated Driver's Licensing law?

Tiered System

A tiered system gives drivers additional driving privileges as they gain driving experience. In its most common form, drivers progress through the following stages of licensing: a learner's permit, an intermediate license, and a full operator's license.

- The learner's permit allows the young driver to operate a vehicle but requires that a licensed driver be in the car with the teen.
- An intermediate license allows the teen to drive without a licensed driver. This stage creates a safer driving experience for young drivers through such restrictions as passenger restrictions, nighttime driving restrictions, and cell phone restrictions.
- The full operator's license gives young drivers full driving privileges.

Nighttime Restrictions

Nighttime restrictions are a critical component of the Graduated Driver's License, because of the number of serious crashes that occur late at night. Nighttime restrictions keep teens from driving during the high risk period and often start between 9 pm and midnight and generally last until 5 or 6 am. Many nighttime driving restrictions allow exemptions for work, school functions, and church functions.

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Passenger Restrictions

Passenger restrictions allow the teen to focus on learning the rules of the road by minimizing distractions from passengers. The presence of passengers increases the risk of crashes and deaths for teen drivers, and the risk increases with each additional passenger.

Violation-free Requirements

Violation-free requirements extend the learning period for young drivers that receive traffic violations, but they also reward those who do not incur any violations by allowing them to move on to the next level. Requiring a six-month period of driving free of traffic violations deters teens from risky driving habits because of the immediate consequences to the behavior.

Endnotes

- 1 National Highway Transportation Safety Administration (2006). "Graduated Driver Licensing System." Traffic Safety Facts: Laws. Washington, DC: NHTSA. Available at <http://www.nhtsa.gov>.
- 2 Data obtained from Kentucky Transportation Cabinet.
- 3 O'Donnell, J. (2005, March 1) "Deadly teen auto crashes show a pattern." USA Today.

Motor Vehicle Deaths Ages 15–19, 2000–2003 (Table 1)

Kentucky	424	Edmonson	0	Larue	4	Oldham	4
Adair	2	Elliott	2	Laurel	11	Owen	4
Allen	1	Estill	2	Lawrence	2	Owsley	1
Anderson	2	Fayette	13	Lee	0	Pendleton	1
Ballard	2	Fleming	7	Leslie	7	Perry	7
Barren	2	Floyd	5	Letcher	7	Pike	9
Bath	3	Franklin	3	Lewis	2	Powell	2
Bell	0	Fulton	2	Lincoln	2	Pulaski	10
Boone	7	Gallatin	1	Livingston	3	Robertson	0
Bourbon	1	Garrard	1	Logan	2	Rockcastle	2
Boyd	6	Grant	3	Lyon	3	Rowan	5
Boyle	2	Graves	6	McCracken	3	Russell	1
Bracken	0	Grayson	8	McCreary	7	Scott	3
Breathitt	2	Green	1	McLean	0	Shelby	2
Breckinridge	3	Greenup	1	Madison	5	Simpson	0
Bullitt	2	Hancock	1	Magoffin	2	Spencer	1
Butler	4	Hardin	8	Marion	3	Taylor	2
Caldwell	3	Harlan	3	Marshall	2	Todd	2
Calloway	8	Harrison	3	Martin	2	Trigg	4
Campbell	2	Hart	3	Mason	1	Trimble	2
Carlisle	0	Henderson	3	Meade	7	Union	2
Carroll	6	Henry	1	Menifee	1	Warren	8
Carter	6	Hickman	2	Mercer	4	Washington	1
Casey	2	Hopkins	4	Metcalfe	0	Wayne	6
Christian	5	Jackson	2	Monroe	3	Webster	0
Clark	3	Jefferson	35	Montgomery	7	Whitley	9
Clay	2	Jessamine	4	Morgan	0	Wolfe	1
Clinton	0	Johnson	3	Muhlenberg	4	Woodford	5
Crittenden	1	Kenton	5	Nelson	5		
Cumberland	5	Knott	3	Nicholas	2		
Daviess	10	Knox	1	Ohio	1		

Source: Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services, Vital Statistics Branch. Processed by Kentucky Population Research, University of Louisville Urban Studies Institute.