

What's the Best Way to Reduce Teen Injuries/Fatalities?
Summary of TRB Young Driver Presentation July 16, 2010
Jean T. Shope

“Jenny Sharp,” a newly elected representative in the state of Ypsitucky dropped by the workshop and asked the participants for their advice on drafting new legislation on a worksheet with the following questions. Although time constraints limited discussion, a summary of 19 written responses follows.

What's the best way to keep teens from getting hurt and killed on the road?

1. Raise the age when teens can drive alone (to reduce driving exposure).

Why is this a good idea?

Raising the driving age would reduce crashes, reduce injuries, and save teens' lives among teens and others involved in teen driver crashes. Teens would be more mature at licensure, be less likely to engage in risky behavior, have improved decision making capability, and be generally better equipped to handle the socio-emotional issues associated with independent driving. Raising the driving age might also encourage the use of alternate modes of transport, aid parents in managing their teen's driving, save lives while minimally impacting teen mobility and socialization, and emphasize driving as a privilege as opposed to a right. Encouraging alternate modes of transport might even have a positive effect on obesity by encouraging walking/cycling.

Why is this a bad idea?

Raising the driving age would only serve to delay teens' opportunity to gain driving experience and teens need practice in order to learn. Newly licensed teen drivers are at higher crash risk when they begin driving - how much would be gained by delaying licensure? Raising the driving age might impact teens' personal mobility, particularly for those living in rural areas who may not have access to adequate public transportation. This option might not be broadly politically or socially feasible in the United States.

2. Let teens drive young, but restrict their driving (to limit exposure to risk).

Why is this a good idea?

Allowing teens to drive under restricted conditions permits them to gain experience but reduces crash risk and fatalities associated with teen driver crashes. This approach is well supported in the literature. Allowing restricted driving delays exposure to higher risk environments until teens have gained more experience and become more neurologically and socially mature to handle more risky/dangerous driving. Younger, restricted driving enhances teens' mobility and might be politically acceptable (from a legislator's viewpoint) in this country. If electronic, in-vehicle monitoring is required as part of early driving experience, teens could receive more feedback on their driving progress.

Why is this a bad idea?

Restricting driving may limit independence, but may not be publically acceptable and is very difficult to enforce without tools like special tags on vehicles to identify provisional licensees. Parents are not very effective in controlling their teens' exposure to driving risks, the restrictions will only impact a small number of high-risk trips, and the teens will still be at elevated risk of crash. Extreme exposure reduction (i.e., not licensing) is a more effective approach to saving teens' lives. Also, teens can't learn to drive in more risky conditions if they are not exposed to those conditions.

3. What would you recommend to a state legislator and why?

Among those respondents who had a preference between limiting driving exposure and limiting exposure to risk, the majority preferred the latter. These participants felt keeping teens safe should involve strict GDL parameters, with specific mention of a night restriction starting at 9 or 10 pm and extending GDL beyond age 17. Some participants felt that incentives for monitoring, and feedback via in-vehicle systems, should be implemented as part of GDL programs. Several respondents felt that it would be best to recommend a combination of limiting driving exposure and limiting exposure to risk, stating that the two are not mutually exclusive and that the best approach would balance mobility and risk. Another important facet of managing teen driving is enforcement. "Real" consequences are needed for violations as well as better enforcement strategies. If violations do occur, then teen drivers' progress through GDL could be delayed. Other suggestions included insurance breaks for parents engaging in active monitoring via in-vehicle systems, a vehicle power restriction, a one-year learner's permit, a cell phone ban, safety belts required for all vehicle occupants, and increasing funding for alternative modes of transit/sustainable alternatives to driving.