

# **Young Drivers: A Study of Policies and Practices**

## ***Summary of Report of Findings***

### **Background**

Virginia's Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), in an effort to identify ways of improving the state's efforts with the young driver population, asked George Mason University's Center for the Advancement of Public Health (GMU) to prepare a detailed study and analysis, complete with recommendations, for consideration by DMV. The ultimate purpose of this study was to examine current approaches designed to best prepare and oversee young drivers in Virginia, to glean what seems to be working and where adjustments and improvements appear to be warranted for consideration.

The rationale for engaging in a project such as this was primarily the differential involvement of young drivers in automobile crashes. As evidenced by the data both from a national and state perspective, young drivers are disproportionately over-represented in these crashes. Thus, DMV sought to identify ways to improve existing policies and approaches for better dealing with young drivers.

In order to maximize the breadth and depth of this study, nine distinct approaches were used to gather information: literature review; interviews with key informants with statewide or national responsibilities regarding young drivers; interviews with key personnel representing highway safety, transportation, and state police in each state; interviews with 5 officials in 60 Virginia jurisdictions; a national survey of state policies on young drivers; national and state data; focus groups with youth, parents, and driver instructors; group discussion with key state officials; and a review of the status of curfew laws in all Virginia jurisdictions.

Based on the extensive literature review conducted for this project, driving is a complicated mix of cognitive, perceptual, and psychomotor tasks. In addition to the cognitive processes involved in the driving task, a proficient driver must have mastery of a range of performance skills, classified as operational, guidance, and navigational. Research documents that adolescents do not have the emotional, mental, and physical abilities of an adult. The prefrontal cortex, the site of judgment formation and organizing center of the brain, is not fully developed until the late teens, with a resulting impact on cognition, decision-making, and the ability to conduct multiple tasks simultaneously. In addition to the physiological development factors, young drivers also lack experience behind the wheel; they have a relatively low repertoire of driving experiences upon which to draw. Since a significant amount of learning about driving is based on reasoning processes, the lack of experience results in young drivers being more likely to make delayed responses, rather than avoidance responses that anticipate safety situations.

### **Current Virginia Young Driver Approaches**

In Virginia, a person must be 16 years old to obtain a driver's license. When applying for a driver's license, the applicant is required to pass a vision screening, a two-part knowledge exam and a road skills test. For juveniles under age 18, parents must provide permission for the license. A learner's permit may be obtained at the age of 15, and must be held until the person is 16 years old; this learner's permit allows a person to drive accompanied by another licensed driver age 18 or older, and gives the prospective licensee ample time for practice. All those under age 19 must complete a state-approved driver education program.

Virginia implements various programs to support the safety of young drivers. The Juvenile Licensing Ceremony is held in the local juvenile and domestic relations court, has the judge inform parents and juveniles of their respective rights and responsibilities, and includes the judge handing the license to the parent. The parent's rights and responsibilities are highlighted in a resource booklet distributed statewide. Parents may cancel the learner's permit or driver's license privileges at any time until the son/daughter is 18 years old. In addition, Virginia law implements an escalated consequences system in dealing with traffic violation offenders, which focuses for first violations on improving a driver's skills, and for repeated offenders may lead to revoking a driver's license. Zero tolerance policies and laws apply to possession or use of alcohol by young drivers.

### **Virginia Data**

An examination of 1998 and 1999 Virginia data regarding convictions for a range of traffic safety violations shows a consistent pattern regarding involvement of young drivers in traffic related violations. For each of seven categories of violations (alcohol and other drugs, speeding, reckless driving, improper driving, high risk behavior, seatbelt violations, and administrative violations), the percentage of convicted drivers in the age category 18-20 was several times higher than that for any other age group. Further, the percentage of drivers age 18-20 who were drinking when they got involved in a fatal crash during each of the years 1995 through 1999 is consistently at or higher than that of any other age group.

## **Themes and Findings**

### **Theme 1 - Parents**

One of the most significant themes emerging from the range of approaches undertaken in this study is the role that parents play. In fact, the involvement of parents is significant and is cited by the wide range of approaches throughout this project. The main findings related to this theme are:

- Parents currently have a large influence on their sons and daughters.
- Parents often have a perspective, which conflicts with that held by safety personnel.
- Parents have a large potential role to play.

### **Theme 2 - The Youth Role**

Young people are generally found to not have a significant role in the efforts surrounding their driving. Because of their relative inexperience in driving, decisions appear to be made without their involvement. Findings within this theme include:

- Young drivers are generally viewed with skepticism.
- The youth perspective is not widely incorporated.

### **Theme 3 - Understanding Youth**

This theme emphasizes a thorough understanding of youth and their driving habits. The insights gathered from the specific Data collection processes--surveys, interviews, and focus groups--all point toward the same conclusions regarding these findings. It is within the framework of these core findings that most recommendations must be grounded. Findings for this Theme include:

- Youth have inadequately developed skills and abilities for safe driving.
- Youth attitudes about driving cause safety concerns.
- The context of driving can compromise driving safety.
- Youth behaviors linked with driving can further compromise safety.

### **Theme 4 - Changes in Youth and Society**

A range of societal factors surrounds youthful driving. These are important to understand as they provide the context within which youth are indeed driving on the highways, as well as for determining appropriate and meaningful strategies, education, and regulations to promote safer driving habits and skills. The findings within this theme include:

- The context of youthful driving is substantively different today.
- Driving is increasingly perceived as a right among youth.

## **Theme 5 - Driver Education**

Consistent through the processes of this project is the call for a revamping of the driver education program. There is not much attention to the specific curriculum components offered through the driver education program. The primary attention is in the manner in which it is administered and the direct relevance for engaging the youth who are participating in this. The seven findings outlined help to illustrate the breath of perspectives in this overall theme. Findings within this theme include:

- Allocated hands-on driving skills training is inadequate.
- Driver education lacks sufficient practical training.
- Young drivers= anticipation and response to situations are inadequate.
- Driver education does not include sufficient interactive elements, or use of technology.
- There is an apparent inconsistency between identified state needs and current emphasis of training activities.
- There is a challenge of linking school-based instructional needs with driver education.
- The court assigned driver improvement courses are viewed as less effective.

## **Theme 6 - Organization and Oversight**

The relationships among several organizations and agencies dealing with young drivers issues have been traditionally designed to include certain organizations and agencies in the decision making process, while excluding or reducing the roles played by others. In addition, the fact that the function of driver education is shared between high schools and private schools, with a split supervision by the State Department of Education and the State Department of Motor Vehicles, poses problems. Findings among this theme include:

- Relationships among organizations do not support wide collaboration.
- The role of private companies in conducting driving curriculum could be posing problems.
- Some aspects of preparation and oversight of instructors are not adequate.

## **Theme 7 - Enforcement, Consistency, and Judicial Role**

This theme emphasizes the fact that a variety of agencies and individuals are addressing young driver issues and that consistency is needed to maximize the message being heard by young drivers and their parents. All too often, inconsistent messages are communicated, thereby undermining the potential for a safety-oriented priority. Findings for this theme include:

- Lack of consistency appears to exist between the actions of police officers and judges.
- Judges=roles may positively affect youth behavior.
- There is a need for increased enforcement.

## **Theme 8 - Perspective of the Graduated Drivers License**

The Graduated Drivers License (GDL) is often cited by many as the best way to address the preparation of young drivers and implementation of laws and strategies to monitor and maintain safety surrounding young drivers This theme addresses issues surrounding the GDL initiative. Findings within this theme include:

- The GDL is viewed as a panacea.
- The definitions of GDL vary.
- Curfews can be a part of a graduated drivers licensing initiative.

## **Theme 9 - Urban and Rural Distinctions**

This theme focuses on distinctions that occur both from the driver's point of view, as well as the implementation of preparation and monitoring regarding differences within urban and rural settings. Findings within this theme include:

- Distinctions exist between urban and rural areas.
- Programs are typically implemented with the assumptions of an urban setting.

## **Theme 10 - Need for Evaluation and Dissemination**

The need for evaluation is included in many projects and studies, particularly with the implementation of new strategies and processes, such as GDL. Many jurisdictions do not have the infrastructure to implement a sound evaluation or methodology. Findings within this theme include:

- Limited evaluation exists on young driver issues.
- Limited awareness of what others are doing to address young drivers is found.

### **Theme 11 - Emerging Approaches**

This theme illustrates many of the approaches, other than GDL, that have been cited to help assist with young drivers. While specific attention is provided to technology in the Young Driver Questionnaire, other approaches are also identified. Among these are the driver licensing ceremony, MADD and SADD activities, and AAA efforts.

- A range of proactive programs exist.

## **Recommendations**

The following recommendations were compiled from the wide range of findings gathered in the process of conducting this Study. These recommendations emerged from the findings identified in the previous section of this report.

### **Theme 1 – Parents**

- Initiatives should be prepared to help get parents up to date and knowledgeable about the influence they have with their sons and daughters regarding driving safety.
- Parents need to be more involved with substantive and quality time with their child's preparation as a driver.
- Parents need to conduct more oversight activities with their children regarding driving.

### **Theme 2 - The Youth Role**

- Youth need to be involved in the process of decision-making regarding young driver issues.

### **Theme 3 - Understanding Youth**

- Professionals should incorporate current insights about the developmental processes faced by youth.
- Program planners should continually strive to better address the inadequately developed skills and attitudes held by youth.
- Promote ongoing examination of the context of driving.
- Continued emphasis must be maintained on issues such as drinking and driving and other risky individual behaviors.
- A positive reward system should be considered.
- Program planners and policy makers must differentiate between the early young driver and the later stage young driver.

### **Theme 4 - Changes in Youth and Society**

- A perspective of anticipating a changed driving setting should always be maintained.
- Active attention must be implemented to promote the responsibility that individuals have regarding driving rather than the right that one has to drive.

### **Theme 5 - Driver Education**

- Increased emphasis should be placed on hands-on driving skills.
- Driver education needs to be more practical.
- Defensive and offensive driving skills should be emphasized at a higher level.
- Current technological approaches should be incorporated to the extent possible.
- The formal driver education curriculum should be prepared in a way that adapts to change and maintains its relevance and currency.
- Formal attention should be placed to reconcile the need for high quality education and the need for sound driver education.

### **Theme 6 - Organization and Oversight**

- A variety of agencies, organizations, and individuals should be involved in planning and reviewing the training and issues surrounding young drivers.
- A clearer definition of inter-organizational and intra-organizational communications is important to achieve consistency in driver education.
- Attention should be paid to the role of commercial driver education services.
- Preparation and oversight of driver education instructors should be improved.
- A close on-site examination of the driver education instruction content and process should be implemented.

### **Theme 7 - Enforcement, Consistency, and Judicial Role**

- Enforcement of laws about driving safety should be increased.
- Differential consequences should be considered for young drivers involved in a safety offense with an aggravating circumstance.
- Judicial cases involving young drivers should be looked at individually.

### **Theme 8 - Perspective of the Graduated Drivers License**

- Individual elements of the graduated drivers license initiative should be considered on their own merits.

### **Theme 9 - Urban and Rural Distinctions**

- In any policy-making process, local distinctions must be made.

### **Theme 10 - Need for Evaluation and Dissemination**

- Evaluation systems, including outcome and process evaluations, should be actively implemented.
- Research and information gathering should be conducted to obtain insights about youth and current approaches in today's society.
- Findings and research should be disseminated widely.

### **Theme 11 - Emerging Approaches**

- The DMV should examine the variety of new approaches to assess their usefulness and applicability to the state.

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