



Highlights of [GAO-10-544](#), a report to Report to the Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure and its Subcommittee on Highways and Transit, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Teen drivers ages 16 to 20 have the highest fatality rate of any age group in the United States. As a result, states have increasingly adopted laws to limit teen driving exposure, such as Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) systems, which consist of three stages: a learner's permit allowing driving only under supervision; intermediate licensure allowing unsupervised driving with restrictions; and full licensure. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), within the Department of Transportation (DOT), supports state teen driver safety programs by researching teen driver safety issues, working to limit teens' access to alcohol, promoting seat belt use, and encouraging states to implement GDL systems. This requested report identifies (1) key GDL system requirements and the extent to which state programs include these requirements, and (2) challenges states face to improve teen driver safety and how states and NHTSA have addressed the challenges. GAO examined state GDL systems, visited six states, and interviewed federal and state traffic safety officials and other experts.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that NHTSA conduct additional research on teen driver safety requirements such as entry age, passenger and nighttime driving restrictions, and driver education to help identify the optimum provisions of GDL systems. DOT officials reviewed a draft of this report and concurred with our recommendation.

[View GAO-10-544](#) or [key components](#). For more information, contact Susan Fleming at (202) 512-2834 or flemings@gao.gov.

TEEN DRIVER SAFETY

Additional Research Could Help States Strengthen Graduated Driver Licensing Systems

What GAO Found

Key requirements of a GDL system, according to traffic safety experts GAO interviewed, include a minimum entry age, a learner's permit phase that includes supervised driving, and restrictions on nighttime driving and driving with teen passengers. Additional key requirements sometimes addressed as part of a GDL system include seat belt use, bans on using electronic devices such as using cell phones while driving, driver education, and parental involvement. Forty-nine states and the District of Columbia have a three-stage GDL system and most state systems include key requirements. For example, all states, including the District of Columbia, have a minimum entry age and learner's permit stage, 49 have nighttime driving restrictions, and 43 have passenger restrictions. However, specific provisions vary. For example, nighttime driving restrictions vary from 6 p.m. to 6 a.m. in certain states to 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. in others. While research shows that GDL systems are associated with improved teen driver safety, additional research on specific requirements, such as minimum entry age, the learner's permit phase, nighttime driving and passenger restrictions, bans on electronic devices, drivers' education, and parental involvement could help state officials determine optimum provisions to strengthen their GDL systems. For example, limited research is available to indicate optimal times to limit teen driving at night or the effect of electronic device bans on teen drivers.

In addition to limited research, officials identified several challenges to improving state teen driver safety programs, such as difficulty in enacting and enforcing teen driver safety laws, limited resources to implement a teen driver safety program, limited access to standardized driver education, and difficulties involving parents as their teens learn to drive, among others. For example, enacting teen driver laws can be challenging because some groups, including legislators, believe these laws infringe on an individual's personal freedom. Officials have identified a number of strategies to address these challenges. For example, several states created a commission or task force to rally public support for new teen driver laws. Strategies to address other challenges included implementing enforcement checkpoints targeting teen drivers, seeking funding from private companies, developing driver education standards, and encouraging parent participation in teen driver programs. NHTSA also helps states address these challenges in several ways, including providing information on its Web site, publishing an annual guidebook on effective traffic safety countermeasures for major highway safety problem areas, including young drivers, and regular contact with state officials.