Alabama’s Teenage Drivers at Risk

An examination of the teen driver issue in Alabama, including a review of the need for a tougher graduated driver licensing law.
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Most teenagers dream of the day they can drive. To a 16-year-old, a driver’s license is a ticket to freedom, the key to a new world of personal mobility. Having a license means they can cruise around after school, take a date to the movies, or cram a bunch of friends in the car and head to the football game.

And many young drivers demonstrate the skills and maturity needed to successfully and safely negotiate the roads in Alabama. But many others, do not fully comprehend that with a license comes tremendous responsibility—and risk.

In fact, 708 such teens in Alabama age 15–19 who were cruising after school, on dates, heading to the football game and driving for other reasons were killed in traffic crashes between 2004 and 2008. Another 38,233 were injured in wrecks in the same five-year time period.

“This is a critical problem that needs immediate action. The longer we wait to make our state’s teen licensing system safer, the more teens will be at risk” said Clay Ingram, AAA Alabama spokesperson. “Alabama teens face higher risk for motor vehicle death and disability than those in most other states.”

The real risk that novice drivers face is clearly evident in the disproportionate number of teens who are killed on Alabama highways. Teens make up about 7 percent of the driving population in Alabama but comprise about 13 percent of the drivers involved in fatal crashes.

In Alabama and across the country, motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for teenagers, outdistancing deaths from homicide, suicide, other accidental injuries, drug dependency, cancer or heart disease.

Yet the cost of their learning to drive doesn’t have to be so tragic in Alabama. While the state implemented a graduated driver licensing (GDL) system in 2002, the system has few restrictions on teen drivers and was classified as “fair” by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

AAA was among numerous health and safety organizations that encouraged the Alabama Legislature to adopt a GDL system in the first place. Under most graduated systems, learning to drive is spread over an extended period of time with restrictions placed on teens at each stage that relate to passengers, nighttime driving and required training. The goal is to give teens more behind-the-wheel experience in less risky situations so they are gradually introduced to the traffic system.

Alabama currently has a minimum requirement of 30 hours of supervised driving time, along with a restriction from driving between midnight and 6 a.m. Teens also may not drive with more than four passengers. While Alabama has taken some steps to help keep teens safe, those steps don’t go far enough to help new drivers gain the valuable experience they need in an environment that is as safe as possible to avoid crashes.

What follows is a look at the magnitude of the teen driver problem and a review of the Alabama’s GDL law. By raising awareness of the seriousness of the novice driver safety issue, AAA hopes to help curb the alarming number of teen deaths on Alabama roads. Behind the wheel doesn’t have to be an unsafe place for teenagers.
Crash Course

Crashes kill, injure thousands of teens yearly

Despite large gains in auto safety technology, such as anti-lock braking systems and air bags, young drivers are not immune to crashes. In fact, evidence indicates in their first two to three years of driving, teens are three to four times more likely to be involved in a crash than the driving population at large—a statistic that has changed little in the past 15 years.

On a national basis, nearly 3,500 teen drivers lost their lives in 2006 traffic crashes, and an estimated 272,000 teens were injured, with thousands of them paralyzed or otherwise unable to resume the life they were living. The emotional costs are staggering, and the financial costs are equally alarming. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration calculated that the lifetime cost to society for each fatality is more than $977,000, and those not directly involved in crashes pay for nearly three-quarters of all crash costs, primarily through insurance premiums, taxes and travel delay.

Unfortunately, Alabama has contributed vastly to these shocking statistics. In fact, 708 teens age 15–19 were killed in crashes on state roads from 2004–2008. Another 38,233 teens were injured in wrecks in the same five-year time period.

When the number of deaths and injuries are combined and analyzed, 21 young people were killed or injured every day in Alabama traffic crashes during this five-year period, almost one every hour.

Making matters worse is that teen drivers aren’t the only ones who perish in these crashes. While 110 teen drivers died in crashes in 2008 in Alabama, another 52 people who were riding with them or in other cars also were killed, paying the price for the teens’ inexperience. In addition, about 6,423 teens were injured in crashes during 2008. But in those same crashes, a total of 35,615 people were injured including the teens themselves as well as their passengers, occupants of other cars and pedestrians.

Sadly, nearly one out of every five traffic fatalities in the state from 2004–2008 occurred in crashes involving teenage drivers. As these numbers show, the issue of teen driver safety isn’t just a problem that affects only teens. Teen crashes exact a large toll on many other drivers on Alabama’s roads.
Alabama teens are overrepresented in crashes

The number of teen deaths in automobile crashes is grievous. But compared to the number of crashes for other age groups, the statistics are particularly deplorable. Compared to all other drivers, teens are substantially over-involved in traffic crashes on Arkansas roads.

On a national basis, the 15- to 20-year-old age group accounts for about 6 percent of the driving population but is involved in 13 percent of all fatal crashes. Further, almost 20 percent of all highway fatalities occur in crashes involving teens. Crash statistics in Alabama are just as ominous. Teens make up about 7 percent of the driving population but comprise about 13 percent of the drivers involved in fatal crashes. Teens have a fatality rate that is four times as high as that of some older drivers.

Driving is perhaps the biggest responsibility entrusted to teens, but the frightening statistics show many are not ready. Teenage drivers have the highest number of crash fatalities among all drivers in Alabama, with only motorists in the 21–25 age group coming close to their fatality rate. Clearly young drivers accumulate a large proportion of their crash experience in the first few years of driving.

Based on these statistics, some may question whether a 16-year-old should be allowed to get an unrestricted drivers license. It’s a question that gained some momentum with the release of a study several years ago by the National Institute of Mental Health that indicated the adolescent brain may be unable to handle the responsibility of driving. Researchers found that the parts of the brain that weigh risks, make judgements and control impulsive behavior are still developing through the teen years and don’t mature until about age 25.

Once drivers do reach their mid-20s, their incidence of collisions decreases significantly and generally continues dropping steadily until a spike among drivers who are 71 and older. Perhaps through maturation, accumulated driving time, changes in driving purpose or some combination of these factors, young motorists learn how to drive more safely. The key is helping drivers gain more experience in a safe manner during their early riskiest years by implementing a comprehensive GDL system, which has been described as “training wheels for teens.”

### Alabama Crash Fatalities by Age Group, 2005–2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Group</th>
<th>Fatalities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-5</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20</td>
<td>578</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>546</td>
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<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>394</td>
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<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
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<td>36-40</td>
<td>318</td>
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<td>41-45</td>
<td>332</td>
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<td>46-50</td>
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<td>61-65</td>
<td>166</td>
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<tr>
<td>66-70</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>71-up</td>
<td>350</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Alabama Department of Public Safety
Teens lack safe driving skills and experience

There are a number of factors that contribute to young drivers’ high crash rates, especially their lack of behind-the-wheel experience. Driving is a relatively complex skill, and regardless of the level of maturity and intelligence, young drivers are still beginners. Some skills take longer to master. In a life-threatening situation, young drivers may simply lack the experience necessary to respond in an effective manner.

Studies show basic vehicle control skills—like turning, steering, and stopping—are achieved quite quickly. But perceptual, judgment and decision-making skills take longer to acquire. For example, compared to more experienced drivers, novices concentrate eye movements in a smaller area, refer to their rearview mirror less often, and look closer in front and to the right of the vehicle. And advanced motoring skills—such as driving at night and during rush hour, detecting threats, and recovering from a skid—take plenty of practice to master.

Nationally, studies have found that driver error plays a role in upwards of 75 percent of the fatal crashes involving teen drivers. Teens typically exhibit poor multi-tasking ability and often don’t have the ability to envision consequences—skills that are crucial to safe driving. Research also shows that teens are less likely to buckle up and more likely to use a cell phone while driving than older motorists.

On Alabama’s roads, among the the most common driver errors contributing to crashes are speeding, failure to yield, following too close and misjudging the stopping distance. In addition, of the nearly 19,000 crashes involving teens in 2008, about 17 percent of the teen drivers weren’t in control of the car.

Making matters worse is the fact young drivers typically exhibit impulsive and high risk-taking behavior. Their immaturity translates into poor driving judgment. Some young drivers may actually seek out demanding or risky situations so they can test their skills, as a way to make driving more exciting. Indeed, one recent study found 25 percent of male teens speed because it is “fun.”

Not only do they take more risks behind the wheel, but young drivers have high-risk exposure to situations ripe for crashes. Novice motorists often drive during nighttime high-risk hours, when visibility is lower. And they typically drive with several of their friends in the car, who can distract them and add to the peer pressure to take risks.

“Inexperience, immaturity and risk-taking behavior all combine to make the first year or two behind the wheel the riskiest period of life for driving,” said Clay Ingram, AAA Alabama spokesperson. “Teens simply lack the experience it takes to be truly safe drivers.”

Unfortunately, the only way for novice drivers to gain experience, sharpen their abilities and develop proper decision-making skills is through driving. For example, a person who has little experience driving and is approaching a bus stop may not perceive the potential hazard of pedestrians entering and exiting the bus. In comparison, an experienced driver has developed expectancies from encountering similar situations and can use them to avoid trouble.

Statistics clearly show the risk of a collision declines significantly after obtaining several years of on-the-road driving experience. The challenge is allowing drivers to gain that experience in as safe a manner as possible.
Why They Crash

Teens commit more errors, hazardous actions

Because of their lack of experience and risky driving behaviors, young drivers commit more errors and hazardous actions behind the wheel than all other drivers combined. And when they’re behind the wheel of a vehicle that weighs more than a ton traveling at 55 mph or more, the errors teenagers make can prove deadly—for themselves and others.

Of the 18,925 crashes caused by teen drivers in 2008 on Alabama’s roads, only 5,631 teens did not commit an error or infraction that contributed to the crash. In these incidents, the teens were doing what they were supposed to do behind the wheel. But unfortunately, roughly 70 percent of the teen motorists in those crashes that year did make some mistake in action or judgement that lead to the wreck, many of which resulted in death for them or someone else in their car or in another vehicle.

Most of the errors and traffic violations teens commit include careless and reckless driving, failure to yield, following too close, misjudging stopping distances and driving too fast. In many instances, the teens committed not just one but several errors that contributed to the crash.

In more than 17 percent of the traffic crashes in 2008 involving Alabama’s teen drivers, the teen motorist was not in control of the vehicle. In addition, 15 percent of the teen drivers in crashes failed to yield and nearly 13 percent misjudged stopping distance, a seemingly minor mistake that can prove deadly.

Mistakes are part of any learning process, including driving. Motorists of all ages commit errors and violate traffic laws, including adults with decades of experience. But teens are at greater risk to do so because of their inexperience and immaturity. Speeding over a hill or passing another motorist on the wrong side of the road may seem exciting and fun to a 16-year-old, but older drivers typically realize that such actions are dangerous and don’t commit them.

It’s important to note that teens themselves aren’t the only ones at risk in these crashes. According to a 2009 study performed by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, the majority of fatalities in teen crashes are people other than the teen driver. Indeed, nearly two other individuals are killed for every teen driver killed, including occupants of other vehicles, the teen driver’s passengers and pedestrians, the study found.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contributing factor</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Driver not in control</td>
<td>5,400 - 23%</td>
<td>5,162 - 23%</td>
<td>4,983 - 23%</td>
<td>3,578 - 17%</td>
<td>3,251 - 17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Failure to yield right of way</td>
<td>4,441 - 19%</td>
<td>4,368 - 19%</td>
<td>4,040 - 19%</td>
<td>3,288 - 16%</td>
<td>2,979 - 16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Misjudge stopping distance</td>
<td>3,816 - 16%</td>
<td>3,582 - 16%</td>
<td>3,232 - 15%</td>
<td>2,521 - 12%</td>
<td>2,376 - 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Following too closely</td>
<td>3,170 - 13%</td>
<td>3,037 - 13%</td>
<td>2,858 - 13%</td>
<td>2,580 - 12%</td>
<td>2,380 - 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unseen object, person or vehicle</td>
<td>2,796 - 12%</td>
<td>2,872 - 13%</td>
<td>2,674 - 12%</td>
<td>1,553 - 7%</td>
<td>1,380 - 7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over speed limit</td>
<td>1,946 - 8%</td>
<td>2,044 - 9%</td>
<td>2,098 - 10%</td>
<td>1,088 - 5%</td>
<td>1,014 - 5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
More passengers and night driving increase risk

While teens often operate under the maxim, the more the merrier when they’re driving around, crash reports indicate that it may be the case of the more the deadlier. And driving at night only adds to the deadly consequences for teen motorists.

According to a number of national studies, the presence of teen passengers increases the crash risk of unsupervised teen drivers. The risk increases significantly with the number of passengers. When there are multiple passengers in the vehicle, the crash risk is three to five times greater than when driving alone. According to the studies, passenger presence is associated with increased crash risk for both male and female teen drivers and the risk is greater for younger teens age 16 and 17 than for older teen drivers.

Indeed, about two-thirds of crash deaths of teens nationwide that involve 16-year-old drivers occur when the beginners were driving with teen passengers, studies show.

What makes matters worse is young drivers who carry passengers commit more driver errors than all other drivers combined. Whether it’s because of the distraction of having other young people in the car or the added peer pressure to take risks while driving, teenagers commit more violations with passengers in the car, violations that often lead to crashes.

Another contributing factor to those crashes is the time of day teens drive. Studies show that driving on weekends and driving at night are significant risk issues. In fact, four out of 10 teenage deaths in motor vehicles occur between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Nighttime driving restrictions in graduated driver license laws typically are associated with crash reductions of 40 to 60 percent during the restricted hours, studies show.
Alabamans unveiled its graduated driver licensing law in 2002 as a means to ease young drivers into the traffic environment. The measure replaced a law that only required a new driver to hold a restricted license and be accompanied by a licensed driver for six months.

However, the obstacles that a teenager must hurdle before gaining an unrestricted license under the GDL law are generally minimal compared to other such systems across the country. There are no restrictions on the time of day a teen can drive or on the number of passengers that the novice driver can transport. Plus, there is no required training time spent with a licensed parent or guardian.

Compared to AAA’s guidelines for an effective GDL law, Alabama’s law falls woefully short.

### Alabama’s current GDL law

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learner’s/Instructional Permit</th>
<th>Intermediate License</th>
<th>Unrestricted License</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Must be at least 15 years old.</td>
<td>• Must be at least 16 years old.</td>
<td>• Must be at least 17 years old.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Teens must hold the permit for at least six months and accumulate 30 hours of supervised driving.</td>
<td>• Intermediate license holders are restricted from driving between midnight and 6 a.m.</td>
<td>• Must have six months of driving experience with no violations to be eligible for an unrestricted license.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Intermediate license holders may not drive with more than four passengers.</td>
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</table>
More comprehensive GDL laws save more lives

Clearly, teen drivers in Alabama have the highest crash risk of any age group in the state, with tragic consequences. The problem is the worst among the youngest motorists, age 16 and 17, who have the most limited driving experience and an immaturity that results in risk-taking behind the wheel.

The solution that most other states have employed are comprehensive graduated driver licensing laws that contain restrictions on teens to help them gain practice behind the wheel under the safest possible conditions. There has been a revolution in driving licensing laws in the last decade, with virtually every state strengthening their GDL systems. Learning the fundamentals of driving and becoming comfortable in traffic require concentration and practice. Effective GDL measures remove distractions and reduce risky situations for novice drivers so they can focus on the road and gain the experience they need.

Unfortunately, Alabama’s GDL system needs to improve several of the components that teen license laws require to make them effective in reducing injuries and deaths. These components—including supervised driving practice and restrictions on passengers and nighttime driving—have been proven in dozens of studies to be the keys to keeping young drivers safe as they learn the rules of the road and the intricacies of driving.

Among the most compelling of the studies was performed by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health’s Center for Injury Research and Policy. Funded by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety, the report found that 16-year-old drivers were involved in 38 percent fewer fatal crashes and 40 percent fewer crashes resulting in injuries if their state has a GDL program with at least five of seven components, several of which Arkansas does not have. The seven components included in the study were:

- A minimum age of at least 16 years old for receiving a learner’s permit.
- A requirement to hold the learner’s permit for at least six months before receiving a license that allows any unsupervised driving.
- A requirement for certification of at least 30 hours of supervised driving practice during the learner stage.
- An intermediate stage of licensing with a minimum entry age of at least 16 years and six months.
- A nighttime driving restriction for intermediate license holders, beginning no later than 10 p.m.
- A passenger restriction for intermediate license holders, allowing no more than one passenger (except family members).
- A minimum age of 17 years for full, unrestricted licensure.

The study also found that in states with GDL laws that have four of the seven components, 16-year-old drivers were involved in 21 percent fewer fatal crashes and 36 percent fewer crashes with injuries.

“Strengthening the state’s graduated driver licensing law is an important step that will reduce needless deaths and injuries on our highways and help thousands of young drivers in Alabama to adjust to their new driving responsibilities,” advised Clay Ingram of AAA’s Public Affairs Department. “Some of the necessary components are in place, but they just need to be strengthened. A comprehensive GDL system is one of the most effective actions that the Alabama Legislature can take to save both young lives and the lives of others involved in crashes with young drivers.”
AAA’s pamphlets and videos teach driver safety

Driving is a complex skill, especially when you are required to navigate crowded highways, share the road with massive trucks, decipher road signs at 60 mph, maneuver on icy roads and determine how close you should drive compared to other motorists.

As an advocate for motorists and travelers, AAA has produced dozens of pamphlets, videos and more regarding all aspects of driving, including driving in inclement conditions, parking, driving on the freeway, avoiding road rage and more. Through these educational materials, AAA works to keep everyone safe behind the wheel.

Among the items available is the New Driver Packet, a free packet of three brochures designed both for parents and teens. The brochure for teens helps new drivers make good decisions about driving and contains tips on avoiding 10 common bad driving behaviors. Another one for parents offers advice on safeguarding your son or daughter behind the wheel. And the third includes parent-to-parent and parent-to-teen driving contracts that spell out the driving rules parents and teens expect from each other. To order the packet, send a self-addressed, stamped business-size envelope to AAA Public Relations, 2400 Acton Road, Birmingham, AL, 32543. Use at least 76 cents postage on the return envelope.

AAA also offers a wealth of driver safety information online. Visit www.AAA.com/publicaffairs to be connected to a world of helpful advice on staying safe on the road. Topics include:

- Aggressive drivers
- Cell phones and driving
- Defensive driving
- Driving survival guide
- Facts on alcohol and its effects on driving
- Freeway driving
- Safety belts
- Pavement edge drop-offs
- Distracted driving
- Vehicle breakdown tips

Also on the Web site, AAA also has a full video lending library for school groups and other organizations that provide group presentations. Topics include the dangers of driving while intoxicated, driving in inclement weather and road rage. The only cost to borrow the videos and DVDs is the return postage.
AAA gratefully acknowledges the cooperation of
the Alabama Department of Public Safety in providing
crash statistics for this report that documents

Alabama’s Teenage Drivers at Risk

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