

AAA Study Supports Strong Teen Driver Licensing Laws, Says AAA

by Bend Weekly News Sources

BOISE - Today, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety issued the results of a study that demonstrates states with nighttime and passenger restrictions for teen drivers record significantly lower crash and injury rates than jurisdictions that do not.

According to AAA, the state of Oregon recorded death and injury rates for 16-year-old drivers that are 20 percent lower than in a comparable jurisdiction without such restrictions. The restrictions are part of graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws enacted in all states, primarily during the past ten years.

The study included a comparison of crash data for Oregon and Ontario to determine whether GDL components are effective in reducing crashes. It also examined attitudes and behaviors of teen drivers and parents in Oregon and British Columbia.

Idaho's GDL law, which was enacted in 2000 and went into effect in 2001, requires teens under 17 to complete a driver training program, then accumulate 50 hours of additional supervised driving during a four-month period before they can apply for a license. The law is modest compared to those in other states, with shorter waiting periods and fewer restrictions for teens seeking a license.

The study found three components to be differentiating factors between crash-free and crash-involved teen drivers: overall compliance with provisions found in GDL laws, adherence to traffic laws, and parental involvement.

"Teens who obey traffic rules, follow GDL restrictions and have actively involved parents are much less likely to crash," said AAA Idaho Director of Public and Government Affairs Dave Carlson. "Based on Idaho's teen collision records, it would be wise to reconsider how we license young drivers and to get both teens and parents more involved in the process."

The study found that compliance with passenger restrictions was especially problematic and teens involved in crashes were more likely than crash-free teens to report more frequent violations. For example, 30 percent of crash-free teens, but only 16 percent of crash-involved teens, reported never violating passenger restriction during their first six months in the intermediate stage of GDL, and nearly half of crash-involved teens reported violating the passenger restriction "more than a few times."

Thirty-three percent of crash-involved Oregon teens reported having received a ticket, as compared to only 13 percent of crash-free teens. Also, teens who had not been involved in crashes reported higher levels of parental monitoring, relative to their counterparts who had been involved in crashes.

Crash deaths for 16- and 17-year-old drivers average nearly 20 percent higher in July and August than in other months during the year, according to AAA Foundation analysis of federal crash data. From 1995 through 2004, an average of 104 16- and 17-year-old drivers died during August, up from an average of 87 per month for the rest of the year.

"Summer vacation for teens often means unstructured schedules, less guidance from mom and dad, and more time spent behind the wheel," said Carlson. "Enforcing safe driving rules is essential in keeping your teen and others safe on the road."

According to the Foundation, a large portion of teen-involved crashes involve multiple passengers. In addition, over one-third of deaths of 16- and 17-year-old drivers occur between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m., despite the fact that there are fewer teens on the road during those hours.

Idaho has no specific passenger restrictions for young drivers, except that no passenger under 21 may be in the front seat when a teen under 17 is completing a mandatory four-month supervised instruction permit process.

From 1995 through 2004, 285 people were killed in Idaho teen-involved crashes. Among those were 111 teen drivers 15-17 years of age, 106 passengers, 50 occupants of other vehicles, and 17 pedestrians or non-motorists.

The Foundation study concludes teens are at a greater risk of crashes due to 1) age-related factors, such as risk-taking behavior, peer pressure, and sensation and thrill seeking; and 2) experience-related factors, such as psychomotor skills, perception of hazards, judgment, and decision-making.

Graduated driving laws ease new drivers into licensure, allowing them to build experience behind the wheel before encountering more complex, risky driving situations.

According to just released data for 2005 from the Office of Highway and Traffic Safety, Idaho drivers 19 and under represent 6.8 percent of all drivers, but accounted for 16.8 percent of drivers in fatal and injury collision. They accounted for 14 percent of all aggressive driving collisions and 23 percent of drivers in fatal and injury aggressive driving collisions. Thirty-eight (38) teen drivers died on Idaho roads in 2005, according to the report.

Carlson said since Idaho's teen licensing law went into effect in 2001 that the number of crashes involving teens decreased, but that the number of licensed drivers in that age group decreased at a greater rate. The bottom line, Carlson said, is that Idaho's GDL is not as effective as in those states, like Oregon, where the process takes longer and includes enforceable restrictions.

To assist parents in guiding their new drivers, AAA Idaho will work with the Division of Motor Vehicles of the Idaho Transportation Department to make crucial information about teen driver safety more accessible for parents and teens on the state DMV Web Site. AAA has developed model language specifically designed for state DMV websites to help parents understand the teen crash problem and their role in turning their teens into safe adult drivers.

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