

Teens at the Wheel

There is *some* good news for 16-year-old drivers. The number of fatal crashes among kids their age has declined in the United States, dropping 26 percent between 1993 and 2003, reports the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

The reason for the decline? Here it is, but it's bad news if you're a teen itching to get behind the wheel at night or with your friends in the car: Most of the fifty states have instituted graduated licensing, which restricts the freedoms of teenagers who are licensed drivers but do not have a full license. In many states, these young drivers are not allowed to drive at night and are prohibited from driving with other teens in a car. These rules have led to fewer teens being killed in car accidents.

Some say the great results with graduated licensing mean that society should take the next logical step: Ban driving by 16-year-olds altogether. So far, only New Jersey has done that. There, you have to be 17 to get a license.

Should other states follow New Jersey's lead and raise the driving age?

myNGconnect.com

- 🔍 Read a special report on teens at the wheel.
- 🔍 Learn safe driving tips and read about studies on teen driving.



A young woman with dark hair and braces is smiling while driving a car. She is wearing a light blue shirt and a watch. A hand is visible in the foreground, pointing towards the steering wheel. A sign with the text "TOO YOUNG TO DRIVE?" is overlaid on the image.

**TOO
YOUNG
TO
DRIVE?**



Comprehension Coach



Should the Driving Age Be Raised?

Driver's ed, not age, is key to road safety

FRED BAYLES, *The Boston Globe*



The latest fatal car crash involving a new teen driver has brought an understandable public outcry. The deaths of Andrea Goncalves, 17, and her 10-year-old brother Joshua add to a recent string of tragedies that have killed young drivers and their friends. Such stories **weigh heavily on** all parents as they hand the car keys over to their children.

But there is strong evidence the Massachusetts Legislature's rush to fix the problem is speeding off in the wrong direction.

Legislative leaders are pushing a bill to move up the legal driving age from 16½ to 17½. Other legislation would extend the period of time teens must drive with adult supervision before they can go solo or take their friends along.

The Legislature's sudden activism has been criticized by those who argue that experience, not age, is the key factor for safe driving. But this debate ignores some harsh truths about two critical failures by the state. The first is the woeful level of driver's education in Massachusetts. The second is evidence that the state's driver's exam is little more than **a formality**. ¹

Last fall, journalism graduate students in Boston University's Boston Statehouse Program conducted an examination of teen driving. They reviewed laws in other states, visited driving schools, interviewed driver's ed experts around the nation, and **polled** hundreds of teen drivers in the community.

Their findings, published in newspapers around the state, should **give pause to** those who think a year's delay in giving teens a license will cure a complex problem.

¹ Evaluate Argument

What two arguments against raising the driving age does the writer introduce in this paragraph?

In Other Words

weigh heavily on deeply worry

a formality something you must do that has no importance or effect

polled questioned

give pause to cause second thoughts for



Among the findings:

1. Although the state requires that teens under 18 take driving classes before getting their licenses, it sets no specific curriculum standards. A majority of other states require driving instructors to take courses to prepare them to teach. Massachusetts instructors only need to have a safe driving record for certification.
2. Teens aren't being tested **consistently** or thoroughly.
 - Thirty-five percent of 459 high school seniors surveyed by the Statehouse Program said they were tested on seven or fewer of the twelve driving skills state police testers are supposed to check. Only 41 percent said they were tested on ten or more of the points.
 - Fifty-six percent of the students said their driver's test lasted ten minutes or less. Only 15 percent said the test took over twenty minutes.
 - Twenty-one percent said their driving school was either "fair" or "poor." Only 24 percent rated their driving school as "excellent." 2

There is no question that instructors at many of the state's 215 driving schools take their responsibilities seriously. However, there also is no mechanism to screen the bad from the good. And there is much evidence of the bad.

A visit to one busy metro area school found some students asleep during class. Others stayed awake by text-messaging friends or reading magazines. Teens at other schools and concerned driving instructors confirm this was not unusual. Some schools, they say, are assembly lines that fill the required thirty hours of instruction with 30-year-old safety videos and simple recitation of the Registry's rules-of-the-road. 3

Fixing driver's ed and **cracking down on** the testing system are essential steps forward, but other efforts are required. The Legislature should act on proposals that require more supervised experience behind the wheel.

2 Evaluate Argument

What supporting evidence does the writer give to convince readers that teens "aren't being tested consistently or thoroughly"?

3 Evaluate Argument

The writer says there is "much evidence" that many driving schools are bad. Do the examples in this paragraph convince you that he is right? Explain.

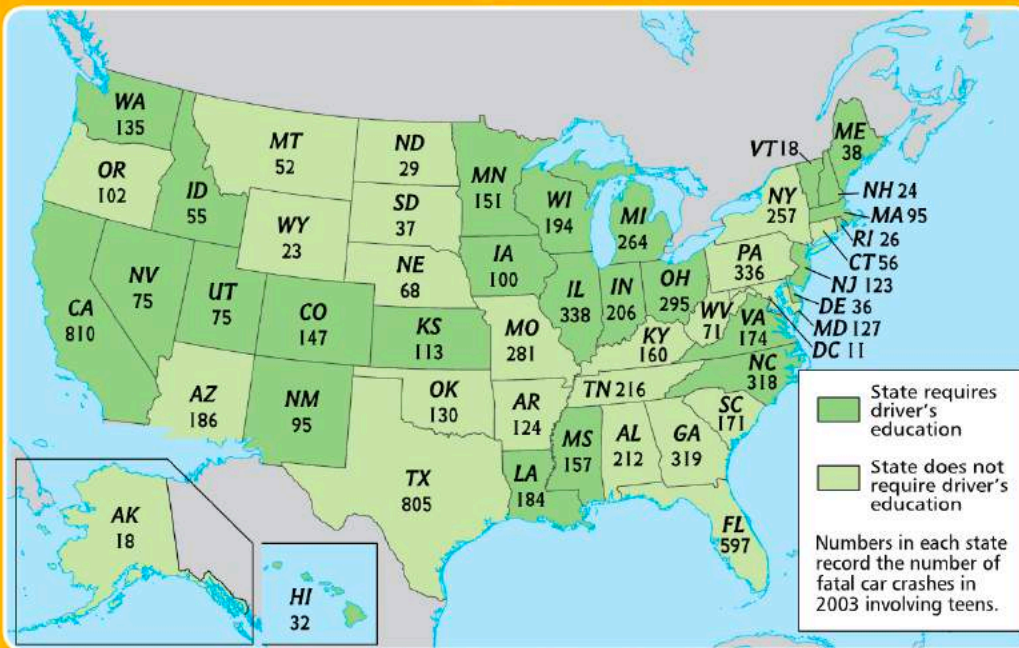
Key Vocabulary

- **consistently** *adv.*, equally

In Other Words

cracking down on improving, fixing

Fatal Crashes in 2003 Involving Teens (Ages 15 and Older)



Source: National Center for Statistics and Analysis, Fatality Analysis Reporting System, 2003

Analyze the Map

Does completion of a driver's ed course help to lower the number of crashes involving teens? Explain your reasoning.



National data suggest that teens become safer drivers if their first year behind the wheel is limited and supervised. There is no evidence, however, that having teens **cool their heels** until they are 17 will magically make them better, more mature drivers.

Also lost in the rush for a **quick fix** is the hard truth that parents must bear more responsibility. Many of the past year's fatal accidents involve recently licensed teens who have **violated** state law by driving after the midnight curfew for under-18 drivers or chauffeuring passengers under 18 within six months of getting a license.

Making parents **culpable** for such actions with stiff civil or even criminal penalties should be part of the legislative debate. Such tough love for parents should not be dismissed as more governmental **intrusion** into the family. A harsh fine **pales in comparison** to the life sentence of grief faced by the parent of a dead teen. 4

4 Draw Conclusions

Do you think holding parents responsible for their teens' driving habits will reduce the number of deadly accidents? Why or why not?



Monitor Comprehension

Summarize

List three actions that the writer believes we should take to reduce unsafe driving among teens.

Key Vocabulary

- **violate** v., to break, not follow
- **intrusion** n., unwelcome interference

In Other Words

cool their heels wait patiently
quick fix fast and easy solution
culpable responsible
pales in comparison is very small compared to



Should the Driving Age Be Raised?

Because immaturity fuels fatal crashes, Georgia should raise driving age to 17 and permit age to 16



MAUREEN DOWNEY, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

The cause of most fatal car crashes involving teenagers is not **poor visibility** or road conditions. It's poor judgment.

The lack of experience and immaturity of young drivers leads them to be overrepresented in accident statistics: 16-year-old drivers account for the highest percentages of crashes involving speeding, single vehicles, and driver error.

Parents often overestimate their children's **proficiency** behind the wheel. After their teens pass driver's education and the on-road test, parents hand over the keys. Unfortunately, the evidence suggests that only one thing reliably **transforms** a teenager into a good driver—growing up. **5**

Driver education programs have been found to have little to no effect on reducing teen crashes. What does seem to work is limiting how early and how much teens can drive and how many passengers they can transport.

The older newly licensed drivers are, the less likely they are to crash, which is why Georgia ought to raise its driving age to 17 and its permit age to 16. Teen drivers should not be allowed to carry nonfamily members in the car during their first year. This **precaution** protects both them and their friends. In 2004, 62 percent of teenage passengers killed in crashes were traveling in cars driven by other teens.

Teens should be forbidden to use cell phones, a proven distraction to both children and adults. The state should also lower its midnight teen driving curfew to 9 p.m., as has neighboring North Carolina. **6**

5 Evaluate Argument

Analyze the writer's comments about parents. How does this reasoning support or weaken her argument?

6 Evaluate Argument

What examples of persuasive language does the writer use in this paragraph to support her argument?

Key Vocabulary

proficiency *n.*, skillfulness

• **transform** *v.*, to change

precaution *n.*, action to protect against harm



Teen Brains: Still Under Construction

Researchers, such as Dr. Jay Giedd at the National Institutes of Health (NIH), have recently begun to understand the biological basis for teenagers' sometimes peculiar behavior.

Giedd, who studies brain development at NIH's National Institute of Mental Health, explained that scientists have only recently learned more about the path of brain growth. One important finding, he said, showed that the frontal cortex area—which governs judgment, decision-making, and **impulse control**—doesn't fully mature until around age 25.

"That really threw us," Giedd said. "We used to joke about having to be 25 to rent a car, but tons of industry data show that 24-year-olds are costing insurance companies more than 44-year-olds are." ⁷

Source: *News In Health*, National Institutes of Health, September 2005



But none of these measures can replace **vigilant** parents, who have to understand that while their teen drivers may be confident about their driving skills, few are competent.

The reasons may rest in the research suggesting that the teenage brain is simply **not wired for** driving and that the impulse control and **risk assessment skills** needed to be a safe driver aren't developed until age 25.

Despite the advances in both car and road safety, teen deaths remain fairly constant. In 2004, drivers age 15 to 20 were involved in 7,898 fatalities, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. Too many Georgia children are among those fatalities.

Police blamed a recent crash that killed a high school senior on **excessive** speed and erratic driving. A day later, another high school student died when she turned left in the path of a dump truck.

⁷ Draw Conclusions

Combine what you already know with this information. What can you logically conclude about the role of brain development in driving?

Key Vocabulary

excessive *adj.*, more than the usual amount or limit

In Other Words

impulse control control of sudden, not-thought-out actions

vigilant watchful, careful

not wired for not naturally capable of

risk assessment skills judgment of danger



In February, a teenager died when the car he was riding in ran off a winding road near his school. Police charged the 16-year-old driver as a juvenile with **first-degree vehicular homicide**, reckless driving, two counts of serious injury by vehicle, and violation of his driver's license. DeKalb County has already had four teen driving deaths, including a 16-year-old who died on the first night of spring break. **8**

Parents have to start treating a driver's license as a first step in their child's driving education, not a final destination. ❖

8 Evaluate Argument

Does the evidence in this paragraph appeal mainly to the reader's sense of logic or sense of emotions? Explain.

ANALYZE Too Young to Drive?

- 1. Explain** What does Fred Bayles think is the proper role of parents in the debate on teenage driving? How do you know this? Give examples from the text.
- 2. Vocabulary** Why does Maureen Downey believe that Georgia should **restrict** issuing driver's licenses to people who are 17 years and older?
- 3. Evaluate Argument** Find two examples of factual evidence used by each writer to support his or her argument. List your examples on a chart like the one below.

Fred Bayles	Maureen Downey

- 4. Focus Strategy Draw Conclusions** Should the driving age be raised or should it stay the same? Support your conclusion with evidence from the selection and what you already know.

Return to the Text

Reread and Write Reread the selection. Then write a paragraph telling which writer balances people's personal rights and privileges better.

Key Vocabulary

- **restrict** v., to limit

In Other Words

first-degree vehicular homicide causing a person's death by driving a car