



## Introduction

## The compelling case for graduated licensing

The symposium provided a timely opportunity for convening the graduated licensing research community to review and discuss existing scientific evidence and set the agenda for future research.

What we know about graduated licensing is encouraging. The systems that have been evaluated have been found to be very effective in reducing crashes and injuries, and public acceptance is high. This in and of itself provides the compelling case for graduated licensing. Yet, the symposium clearly revealed that the full potential of graduated licensing is nowhere near being realized.

All but a handful of states and provinces have introduced at least one element of graduated licensing since the mid-1990s. The purpose of the symposium was to gather and review the available research studies/evidence from these programs and to “document the science” of graduated driver licensing. Because this is a relatively new highway safety program, the focus of the meeting was on assessing “what we know so far,” as well as what we do not know but need to know in order to provide more complete documentation and guidance for extending and maximizing the benefits of graduated systems.

In concept, graduated licensing is simple and appealing. It is a way of managing initial on-road driving experience, prescribing this experience in lower risk settings to protect beginners while they learn. What is needed to make graduated licensing succeed are restrictions on high-risk driving that are of sufficient strength and length and high compliance with the restrictions.

The article on patterns of risk (Williams) provides the formula for a graduated system. Research shows that the supervised learner period entails little crash risk. However, risk increases dramatically upon licensure. It is highest in the first month of driving (more than six times higher than in the learner period). Then risk drops fairly sharply during the first 6 months and more gradually over the next 1 1/2 years. Thus, the formula calls for an extended learner phase and restrictions on high-risk driving once licensed, especially during the critical first few months.

In the articles on the genesis and evolution of graduated licensing, Waller discusses the logic of graduated licensing as the preferred way of learning a complex skill such as driving and notes the initial obstacles to acceptance of this sensible but different approach. Simpson chronicles the “tortuous journey” toward acceptance of

graduated licensing, cautioning that this journey is not over. The strength of the systems varies widely, and some graduated licensing programs are “in name only.” This is reflected in the evaluation results. All evaluations have found crash reductions, but the range is from 4% to more than 60%.

Mayhew reviews what we know about the all-important learner period, concluding that the scientific research provides strong support for an extended learner stage. However, from a safety standpoint we have yet to establish the optimal features of this stage. Several researchers (Preusser & Leaf; Shope & Molnar; Lin & Fearn) discuss risk factors during the initial licensing stage. Late-night driving and transporting passengers are well-established high-risk activities for teenagers, and nighttime and passenger restrictions during this stage are considered to be the keystones of graduated licensing. Although most states now have late-night restrictions, they typically start at midnight or 1 a.m., and the majority of states have no passenger restrictions at all. These are major gaps that need to be addressed.

Foss and Goodwin remind us that whatever the restrictions are and however strong they may be, there has to be compliance for them to be effective. The higher the compliance, the greater the effect of the law. Compliance is a function of factors such as knowledge of the restrictions among teens and their parents, buy-in to their rationale, and enforcement of the restrictions by parents and police. Little is known about police attitudes and enforcement of graduated licensing restrictions. Parents are thought to be the chief enforcers of graduated licensing rules, and Simons-Morton and Hartos describe approaches that show promise in getting parents more involved in managing the driving of their sons and daughters. McKnight and Peck discusses ways in which graduated systems can encourage motivation for safe driving and compliance with the rules, including the provision under which advancement to enhanced driving privileges depends on a violation-free driving record during prior stages.

Ferguson addresses the extent to which risk factors not typically addressed by graduated systems can be incorporated or addressed in other ways. For example, one state addresses the low seatbelt-use rules among teen drivers and passengers by incorporating into the graduated system special penalties for not buckling up. Vehicle selection for teenagers is another crucial factor, and this might be

addressed through programs aimed at getting parents more involved in the learning-to-drive process. Other measures adopted around the world to deal with the inexperience and risk-taking of young drivers (e.g., restrictions on speed and vehicle power) are not yet supported by research. Ferguson rightly warns that it is important not to make graduated systems overly complex, and that the main concern needs to be that the known risk situations of late-night driving and transporting passengers are fully addressed rather than adopting additional unproven approaches.

Begg and Stephenson describe the inauguration of New Zealand's graduated licensing program in 1987 and its evolution, posing the question as to what North America can learn from a more mature program. The lessons include the importance of a comprehensive system involving both nighttime and passenger restrictions, and that graduated licensing programs should be strengthened over time, taking advantage of their wide public acceptance.

Finally, the article by Hedlund, Shults, and Compton summarizes the symposium proceedings, cataloging what we know now and also what additional research is needed. The research task ahead is to further document the effects of driving restrictions, ranging from weak to strong, and to understand the factors that influence compliance.

The early evaluations are consistently encouraging, with sometimes dramatic results. We are off to a good start, but it is just a start. Now comes the job of strengthening graduated licensing requirements and instituting methods to increase compliance.

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