Night Driving Curfews for Young Drivers

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Driving at night is associated with elevated crash risk for drivers of all ages. The driving task is more difficult when it is dark, and risky driving associated with recreational activities and alcohol use is more likely to occur at night. However, nighttime driving is especially hazardous for young beginners (Figure 1). Data from the 1990 Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey indicate that 16-17 year-old drivers accumulate only 14 percent of their miles between 9 p.m. and 6 a.m. but experience 39 percent of their fatal crashes during these hours. Three-quarters or more of the fatal crashes in this age group involving alcohol occur at night (Williams et al., 1995).

Figure 1: Fatal Crash involvement per 100 Million Miles, day vs. night, by driver age, 1990

In several countries the nighttime driving of beginners is restricted by driving curfews. The rationale is that curfews protect young people by having them obtain initial on-road experience during the day, deferring higher risk nighttime driving until some experience has been gained.

Night driving curfews address only a small portion of driving by 16-17 year-olds, but they potentially affect a sizable portion of their crashes including most involving alcohol. Only
recreational driving is targeted. Most jurisdictions with curfews allow driving at night with an adult or driving to work or to conduct other essential tasks.

Studies in the United States and New Zealand have found night driving curfews are very effective in reducing crashes (Preusser et al., 1984; Levy, 1988; Frith and Perkins, 1992; Ferguson et al., 1996). Crash reductions during curfew hours - as much as 62 percent in New York and 69 percent in Pennsylvania - have been reported. Crash reductions can be expected to the extent that exposure is reduced. Surveys indicate that although many young people say they have violated curfews, compliance is reasonably good. (Opinion Research Corporation, 1985; Frith and Perkins, 1992; Harre, Field, and Kirkwood, 1996). For example, surveys in New York and Louisiana indicated that the majority of those subject to the curfew had violated them, but most claimed to have done so no more than twice (Williams, Lund, and Preusser, 1985). In Nova Scotia, 40 percent of young people currently holding restricted licenses said they had violated the curfew, and 12 percent had done so often (Mayhew et al., 1997). It is also likely that when young people drive during restricted hours, they do so more carefully.

Curfew effects can be diminished if young people travel during curfew hours as passengers, pedestrians, or pedalcyclists rather than as drivers, or if they drive more during unrestricted hours than they would without curfews. There is no evidence that such substitution takes place and, in fact, reductions in passenger injuries during curfew hours have been found in age groups affected by the driving restriction (Preusser et al., 1984). There is, however, some evidence that curfews deter early licensure and that this contributes to crash reductions at all hours (Preusser et al., 1984). For example, the motivation to get a license at age 16 in a state like New York may be lessened because the license is valid only during the day and for purposeful or supervised nighttime driving.

Six U.S. states adopted night driving curfews mostly in the 1960s. The circumstances of their adoption are unknown, and the restrictions vary considerably. In particular, starting times for 16 year-olds range from 9 p.m. in New York to 1 a.m. in Massachusetts.

A curfew was adopted in Maryland in 1979 as part of a provisional licensing system. In recent years curfews are being given renewed consideration as part of graduated licensing systems. Graduated systems phase in young beginners to full-privilege driving, limiting initial experience to lower risk situations. Two phases precede full privileges: a learner's period of six months or more, during which supervised driving is encouraged; and an initial license for generally one year when unsupervised driving is not allowed under higher risk conditions, e.g., late at night; with only other teenagers. A night driving curfew during the initial licensure stage is a linchpin of a graduated system. New Zealand adopted a 10 p.m. curfew in 1989 as part of a graduated system, and Nova Scotia in 1994 instituted a midnight curfew for initial license holders. Among
U.S. states, Florida and Michigan enacted graduated systems in 1996 that included night driving curfews. Florida’s curfew begins at 11 p.m. for 16 year-olds and 1 a.m. for 17 year-olds. Michigan’s curfew begins at midnight.

Despite this trend, some Canadian and U.S. jurisdictions with new licensing systems (e.g., Ontario, Connecticut, Kentucky) considered curfews but did not enact them. Ontario and Kentucky imposed night driving curfews in the learner’s stage, in which only supervised driving is allowed, but once the driving test is passed, initial license holders can drive unsupervised all the time. This makes little sense.

The freedom to drive at night with friends is important to young people, so teenagers subject to curfews would not be expected to endorse them. For example, a recent survey of restricted license holders in Nova Scotia, where beginners are subject to a curfew for two years, found only 28 percent in favor of this restriction and 43 percent strongly opposed (Mayhew et al., 1997). There is some evidence, however, that many teenagers no longer affected by curfews understand and approve of them and that, where curfews exist, teenagers tend to accept them as the norm. For example, when 17-18 year-olds in three states with longstanding curfews were asked if they were “in favor of some kind of night driving curfew for beginning teenage drivers,” acceptance was high. Eighty percent in Pennsylvania favored curfews, as did 67 percent in New York and 63 percent in Illinois (Opinion Research Corporation, 1985).

Parents strongly endorse night driving curfews. Table 1 summarizes responses from six separate telephone surveys of parents whose children had not yet begun the licensing process, were becoming licensed, or were already licensed (Williams and Lund, 1986; Ferguson and Williams, 1996; Williams et al., 1996, Mayhew et al., 1997; Williams and Preusser, 1997). About three-quarters or more of parents said they favor curfews for their children. Parents are especially favorable in states where curfews already exist. For example, 94 percent of parents of graduating seniors in New York endorsed curfews. So did 90 percent of Florida parents whose 15 year-olds were about to enter a new licensing system with a curfew for 16 and 17 year-olds (Williams, et al., 1996). In Nova Scotia, 86 percent of parents whose teenage children currently hold a restricted license endorsed the curfew (Mayhew et al., 1997).
Table 1: Percent of Parents in Favor of Night Driving Curfews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent in Favor</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. parents of teenagers, 1985</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>U.S. parents of 17 year-olds, 1995</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents of 15 year-olds, 1996</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>82</td>
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<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>90</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parents of graduating seniors, 1996</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connecticut</td>
<td>81</td>
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<tr>
<td>Delaware</td>
<td>85</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Jersey</td>
<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nova Scotia parents of teenagers with restricted licenses</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
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Parents who favor curfews also want early starting times. Although many existing curfews begin at midnight or later, the majority of U.S. parents in each of the eight groups represented in Table 1 favored curfews beginning at 10 p.m. or earlier. In New York, which has a 9 p.m. curfew, 79 percent favored 9 p.m. or earlier. Obviously, the earlier a curfew starts, the greater the number of crashes potentially affected. This is especially important for 16 year-olds, among whom the majority of nighttime crashes occur in the 9 p.m.-midnight period.

Curfews empower parents. Parents rather than the police are the chief enforcers of curfew laws. Surveys have indicated that most teenagers perceive correctly that curfew violators are unlikely to be caught by the police but that their parents make them comply (Williams, Lund, and Preusser, 1985).

Debate about night driving curfews will continue in the United States and elsewhere as many jurisdictions consider graduated licensing. Opponents of curfews have characterized them as unfair to young people, arguing that they penalize everyone of specified ages including many responsible drivers who should not be restricted. However, all young beginners are inexperienced drivers in need of on-road practice to become more proficient. When very young people are allowed to drive, crash risk is further heightened. A night driving curfew is a compromise between mobility and safety that, for a limited time, allows low-risk daytime and
essential nighttime driving, thus providing protection during a period in which young beginners are particularly vulnerable.

REFERENCES


