Timing of Driver’s License Acquisition and Reasons for Delay among Young People in the United States, 2012

The Situation

- Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for U.S. teenagers
- Despite the traditional view that teens are eager to begin driving as soon as possible, evidence of young adults voluntarily delaying licensure has raised a number of questions in recent years
- Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) systems – which have reduced 16- and 17-year-old driver crashes – generally do not apply to drivers ages 18 and older
- Concern persists that if teens are delaying licensure, many may not be covered by GDL protections

New Study (Available Here)

- Objectives:
  - Determine proportion of teens licensed within 12 months of home state minimum age, and by 18th birthday
  - Investigate reasons for delay (e.g., financial constraints, GDL concerns) and demographic factors (e.g., household income)
- Methods:
  - Nationally-representative survey of 1,039 persons ages 18-20
  - Online questionnaire (English and Spanish)
- Questionnaire addressed:
  - Current license status
  - Ages when permit and license were obtained
  - Reasons for delay (19 items; each could be rated a very important reason, somewhat important reason, minor reason, or not a reason)
  - Opinions about driver licensing policies

Key Findings – Licensure Status and Timing of Licensure

- 44% licensed within 12 months of minimum age in their state
- 54% licensed before 18th birthday
- 29% still not licensed at time of survey (12% had learner’s permit)
Key Findings – Factors Associated with Licensure by 18th Birthday

- Household Income
  - <$20K/year: 25% licensed by age 18
  - >$100K/year: 79% licensed by 18
- Race/Ethnicity
  - Non-Hispanic white: 67% licensed by 18
  - Non-Hispanic black: 37% licensed by 18
  - Hispanic: 29% licensed by 18

Key Findings – Self-Reported Reasons for Delay

- Biggest reasons for delay were not having a car (44%), ability to get around without driving (39%), cost of gas (36%), cost overall (36%), and “just didn't get around to it” (35%)
- Fewer than one in four cited reasons related to GDL and driving restrictions

Key Findings – Opinions about Driver Licensing Policies

- 77% support restrictions on novice drivers carrying teen passengers (in general)
  - 12% say zero should be allowed; 32% say one
- 77% support night-time driving restrictions (in general)
  - 51% say these should start at 10PM or earlier
- 28% support requiring all new drivers, regardless of age, to first obtain a restricted license
- Nearly all (96%) believe age 16 is the youngest a teen should be able to get a license that allows independent driving; more than half (58%) believe it should be 17

Conclusions

- Most teens don’t get licensed right away
- At least 36% of drivers will get licensed outside GDL provisions
- Most who delay licensure say this is due to cost, financial constraints, or lack of opportunity or interest
- Despite speculation that teens may be delaying licensure to avoid the restrictions imposed by GDL, relatively few cite this as a reason for their decision
- Even if GDL isn’t the main reason for licensure delay, significant numbers of novice drivers are likely not exposed to GDL protections because of the delay

Useful Resources

AAA and the AAA Foundation are committed to helping teens stay safe on the roads, and have developed several resources for families with teen drivers:

- TeenDriving.AAA.com – This AAA site provides state-specific information to help parents and their teens navigate the learning-to-drive process.
- Driver-Zed – This interactive risk-management training tool is designed to help teens recognize how to react in a variety of driving scenarios.
- Dare To Prepare – Dare to Prepare is a 90-minute pre-permit presentation for parents and teens that provides critical information families need to know before teens take the wheel. A shorter online version of the program is available at www.TeenDriving.AAA.com.

For more information about the AAA Foundation’s teen safety research, please visit www.AAAFoundation.org.