

Graduated Driver's Licenses

Policy Description

Graduated driver licensing (GDL) is a system designed to delay full licensure for teenage automobile drivers, thus allowing beginning drivers to gain experience under less risky conditions. Teenagers are targeted because they are at the highest risk for motor vehicle crashes, including alcohol-related crashes. By imposing restrictions on driving privileges, GDL reduces the chances of teenagers driving while intoxicated.

A fully developed GDL system has three stages: (1) a minimum supervised learner's period; (2) an intermediate license (once the driving test is passed) that limits unsupervised driving in high-risk situations; and (3) a full-privilege driver's license after completion of the first two stages. Beginners must remain in each of the first two stages for set minimum time periods.

The learner's stage has three components:

1. Minimum age at which drivers can operate vehicles in the presence of parents, guardians, or other adults.
2. Minimum holding periods during which learner's permits must be held before drivers advance to the intermediate stage of the licensing process.
3. Minimum age at which drivers become eligible to drive without adult supervision.

The intermediate stage of GDL law has five components:

1. Minimum age at which drivers become eligible to drive without adult supervision.
2. Unsupervised night-driving prohibitions
3. Primary enforcement of night-driving provisions.
4. Passenger restrictions, which set the total number of passengers allowed in vehicles driven by intermediate-stage drivers.
5. Primary enforcement of passenger restrictions.

“Primary enforcement” refers to the authority given to law enforcement officers to stop drivers for the sole purpose of investigating potential violations of night-driving or passenger restrictions. Law enforcement officers in states without primary enforcement can investigate potential violations of these provisions only as part of an investigation of some other offense. Primary enforcement greatly increases the chance that violators will be detected. The single component for the license stage of GDL is the minimum age at which full licensure occurs and both passenger and night-driving restrictions are lifted.

Status of Graduated Driver Licensing Policies

All 51 jurisdictions have some form of GDL policy and all states have full three-stage criteria. The minimum age for each stage and the extent to which the other restrictions are imposed vary across jurisdictions. An important GDL provision related to traffic safety is the minimum age for full licensure. Full licensure is allowed by 15 jurisdictions on the 18th birthday; 3 jurisdictions permit full licensure above age 17 but under age 18; and 17 jurisdictions permit full licensure on the 17th birthday (see Exhibit I.15). The remaining 16 jurisdictions permit full licensure to those who are under 17 but at least 16 years old. All but one jurisdiction have night-

driving restrictions. Forty-seven jurisdictions place passenger restrictions on drivers with less than full licensure.

Trends in Graduated Driver Licensing Policies

On January 1, 1996, only one state (Maryland) had a three-stage GDL law. However, by 2000, 23 jurisdictions had enacted three-stage GDL laws, and by 2012, that number had risen to the current level of 51 (see Exhibit I.16).

Exhibit I.15: Minimum Age of Full Driving Privileges Laws as of January 1, 2017

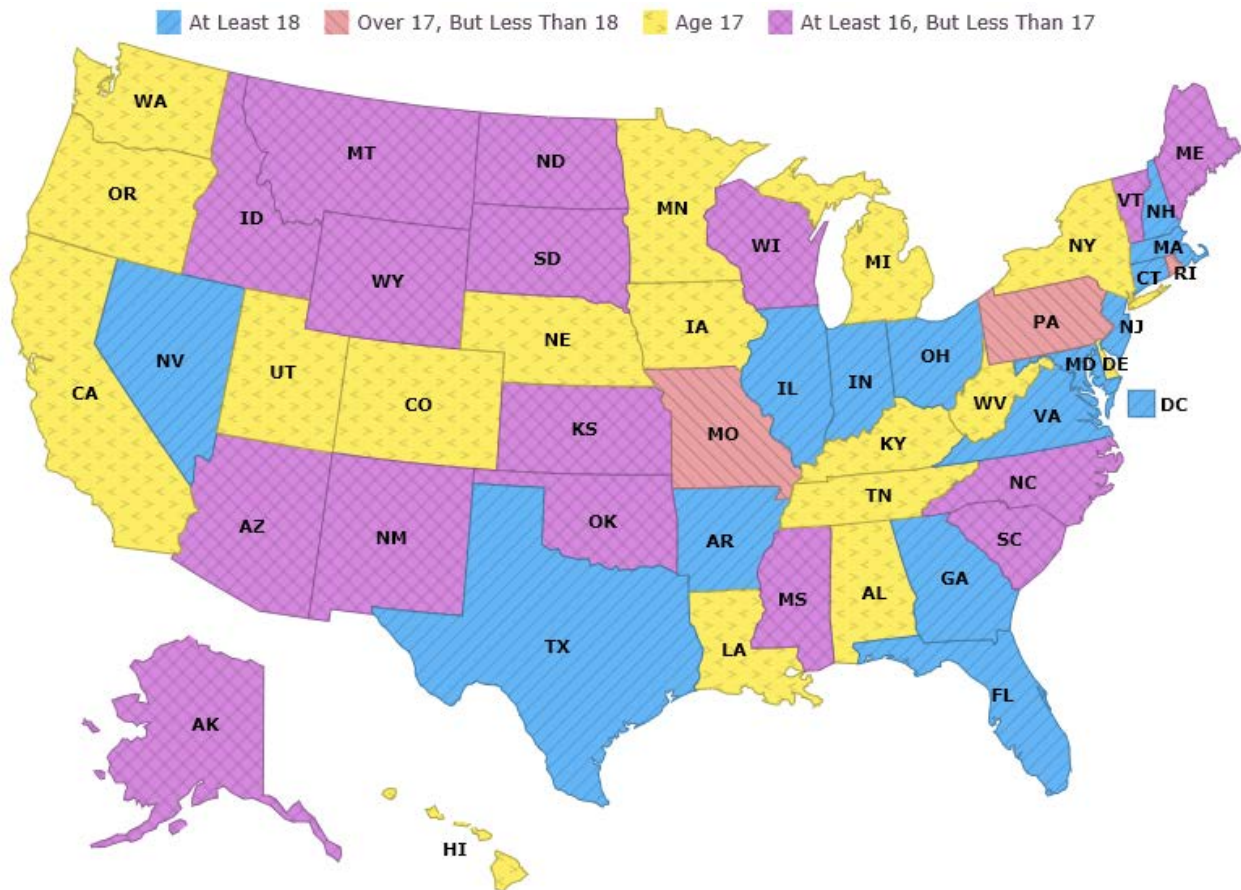
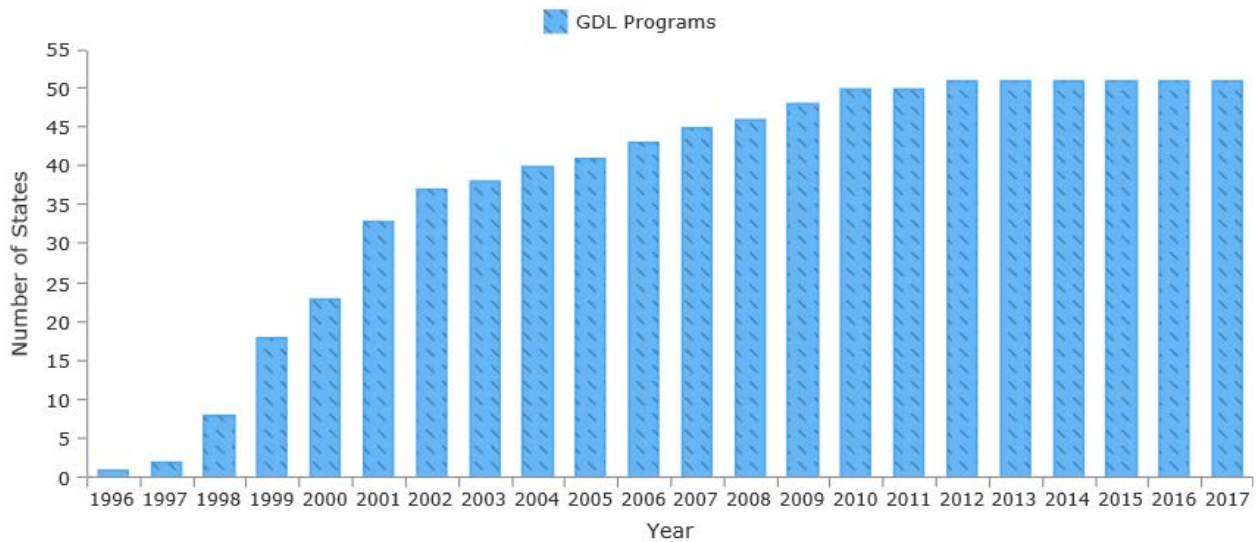


Exhibit I.16: Number of States (and District of Columbia) with Three-Stage GDL Policies, July 1, 1996, through January 1, 2017



Data Sources and Citations

Legal research for this topic is planned and managed by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and conducted under contract by The CDM Group, Inc. Historical data for the years 1996 through 2004 were obtained from Chen, Baker, and Li (2006). Data from January 1, 2005, until December 31, 2008, were obtained from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (http://www.iihs.org/laws/pdf/us_licensing_systems.pdf).

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