

KEY INFORMANT INTERVIEWS

Key informants agreed that the typical young driver needs experience to deal with the complexity of driving and emergency situations. Their inexperience and immaturity lead to more risk taking, speeding, unnecessary passing, and related behaviors. Risk taking is a result of the exuberance of youth, their invincibility, and not understanding the ultimate consequences of their actions.

Alcohol is cited as a specific concern in some localities. There is a strong penalty for use of alcohol/drugs for those with driver licenses. It is found that older teens have a tendency to drink more than younger teens. Drinking and driving is still a big issue, especially on college campuses.

Key informants also observed that due to inexperience and lack of maturity, more problems are seen with 16 and 17 year olds in traffic court. It is believed that real problems start at age 18 due to less parental supervision, more options available, and a no-rules environment in university settings; therefore, it is not surprising that the courts see more alcohol-related offenses.

Regarding parents, key informants believe that parents have more influence with their children regarding the gravity and responsibility of driving a vehicle and need to devote the time to get their children behind the wheel. Parents need information, prepared just for them, from police, judges, and the defense attorney, in order to talk to new drivers long before the licensing ceremony. They need to understand their rights and responsibilities to be able to pull licenses, restrict driving, and reduce privileges. They need to be involved with the skill development and experience needed for the young driver by driving with their child for at least 50 hours. Parents must have good judgment since the responsibility is enormous and a child could die.

In regard to enforcement, several key informants suggested that there is a need to step up enforcement around the schools. They recommend enforcing the laws on the books; more laws are not needed. They also cited the need to increase incentives or penalties associated with non-belt use by novice drivers, and for judges to look at the seriousness of the individual case even when dockets are full and they are trying to get them through.

Regarding driver's education, several key informants suggested that there is a need to overhaul driver education; they cited a need for a more meaningful program with more technology involved, which addresses risk-taking better, and provides youth more real-world driving experiences (instant lane-change drill and other road maneuvers at a driving track).

Those commenting on the licensing ceremony found that it does inform parents about the possession of alcohol, demerit points, and use and lose sanctions. It helps reinforce the parent's right to suspend their child's driver's license by writing to the DMV; their right to take the youth's driver's license, and their ability to suspend it for more than driving (alcohol, grades, and chores). Parental control

and the reinforcement of the parent are stressed. The responses are favorable from parents, but ambivalent from youth.

About laws in Virginia, the key informants found that the penalties are more gradual for teen/novice drivers. That is, if they get a ticket, a driver improvement course; for a second offense, passenger restrictions may be implemented; for a third offense, they may lose their license.

Respondents also indicated that the State Department of Education just revised the curriculum for driver education. The new curriculum will emphasize more parental involvement, but will not change the time required behind the wheel. They suggested that it should improve the classroom part of the curriculum; however, the curriculum should also require evasive driver skills and off the road recovery.

Regarding graduated licensing, key informants indicated that some states have implemented the graduated licensing program. For example, a Washington, DC law just went into effect, and Georgia has a teen driver responsibility act, strict regulations, and a form of graduated licensing. A couple of key informants said that, based on the statistics that they had heard cited by states with the graduated licensing program, it seems to be effective; these few individuals also suggested that Virginia is averse to graduated licensing.

A few of the key informants stressed that Virginia does do a good job of conveying to its drivers that driving is a privilege. These individuals noted that drivers are clearly held accountable for any driving violations that do occur.

Among their suggestions to improve the safety of young drivers were: primary seat belt enforcement laws; later issuing of learner's permits; passenger restrictions on 16 year-old drivers; a night time driving restriction; mandatory seat belt law; an incentive plan for good drivers; and parental certification of a minimum number of hours driven.