

## **THEMES AND FINDINGS**

Through the range of methodologies implemented to examine issues surrounding young drivers, a wide range of findings emerged. For ease of understanding, these findings are clustered within 11 broad themes. With each theme are the relevant findings with an explanation of their content as well as the sources from which these findings came. In the following section of this report, recommendations will be highlighted which follow from these findings.

At the end of each of the themes in this section, a brief summary of Virginia's current strategies is highlighted. These are offered because, through the course of preparing this report, it was noted that, quite often, individuals were not aware of what the Commonwealth was already doing to address the preparation of the young driver. Thus, these brief summaries help to highlight some of the approaches currently undertaken, especially by the Department of Motor Vehicles. Note that each of these was also highlighted in one of the introductory sections of this report.

### **Theme 1 - Parents**

One of the most significant themes emerging from the range of approaches undertaken in this study is the role that parents play. In fact, the involvement of parents is significant and is cited by the wide range of approaches throughout this project.

#### **Finding 1a - Parents currently have a large influence on their sons and daughters.**

Parents have a tremendously important role that they could play overall. While they are already viewed as a model in their driving behavior, their sons and daughters would benefit from greater attention to what they are actually modeling. For example, some parents report driving using skills about which they were taught many decades before, and which are no longer the current "state of the art" with driving safety. Thus, they would benefit from an update of their knowledge about driving safety issues. In addition, it was noted in some focus groups that parents are often a poor role model through their inattention to safety issues as well as their response to traffic conditions. This was noted with how they handle traffic and weather conditions as well.

Parents can also serve in the role of enforcer. This may be setting standards for follow-through by their sons and daughters, and it may also include support of judicial sanctions as they emerge. Driver safety instructors interviewed suggested that parents want the driver training in the school curriculum and believe that driver education, through a formalized school or private sector process, is like a "magic approach" that automatically makes their sons and daughters safe drivers. The inappropriateness of this parent perspective was emphasized.

From the parent focus groups, parents believed that they should help their sons and daughters by citing their own experience and in the process of managing multiple tasks simultaneously. Thus, behind-the-wheel training and mentoring should include assistance in how to react appropriately, as

well as to not over-react inappropriately. Parents also suggested that rewarding young drivers for being good drivers would be a helpful process. Parents note that practical experience should be increased because driver education is not sufficient. Thus, experience and practice is essential for promoting a safer young driver. As one parent said, “We should really take the time to go with them and practice with them while they have the permit.” Young drivers interviewed suggested that they, too, wanted greater parental involvement. Parents need to share their experience, and parents should drive with young drivers during the learner permit phase, and continue to do so after they get their permit. Parents could also help by caring more about their sons’ and daughters’ driving. Some youths stated: “some parents don’t really care about their children’s driving, and if they don’t care, the kids won’t care.”

Additional opportunities for parental involvement come from the **Young Driver Questionnaire**. When asked the extent to which a range of organizations were involved in addressing young driver licensing, education, and sanctioning in the state, parent groups rated near the bottom of all groups listed; parent groups scored 2.2 on a 5-point scale with 1 indicating “not involved at all” and 5 indicating “very involved.” Within Virginia, it was noted that many parents do not know of the right that they have to get the driver’s license withdrawn from their son or daughter. They were not aware of this as a feasible option that they could implement.

Interviews with key informants echoed the themes mentioned above. In general, they mostly agreed 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. Getting enough practice behind the wheel, under adult supervision, is a large factor in a young driver learning good driving habits and getting more experience. It is paramount that parents get involved and become a role model for good driving.

**Finding 1b - Parents often have a perspective which conflicts with that held by safety personnel.**

Through a range of sources, including the focus groups with youth and parents as well as the key informant interviews, it appears that parents are particularly pleased when their sons and daughters receive driver licenses. From a perspective of convenience, this frees the parent from the need to transport their children to after-school clubs and organizations, social events, and other activities with which they are involved. Further, parents report that they find it helpful when their son or daughter can help transport other children in the family, as well as run errands for the parents. It is reported that the finding that parents are relieved at having the child drive, may result in prematurely rushing the full and appropriate preparation of the young driver to operate a motor vehicle safely. The important role of experience and advanced preparation is continuously cited through the interviews, professional literature, focus groups, and telephone survey information. Overall, the suggestion from youth, parents, and others interviewed is that inexperience is the “number one” contributing factor to youth involvement and unsafe risky or potentially hazardous driving situations. Moving this driving license process too quickly conflicts with the need for full attention to safety.

**Finding 1c - Parents have a large potential role to play.**

The belief that parents currently have a large influence on their sons and daughters is supported from a variety of sources. Through the focus groups conducted with youth, there is an indication that they would appreciate an increased amount of behind-the-wheel training in preparation for their driver's licenses. While some of this training may be included as part of a driver's education class in a classroom setting, another part of the training would be with their parents or other type of adult supervision. Young people call for an increased amount of practical and good tips. Young people also state that parents can have a negative influence by attempting to teach approaches which are not consistent with those taught in the driver's safety classes (for example, the proper position of the two hands on the steering wheel). Some key informant interviewees, as well as the youth in the focus groups, outlined this as a concern. Youth call for parents to take the initiative and assist in providing increasing amounts of responsibility to enhance their maturity. The youth suggest increasing the amounts of practice in handling the behind-the-wheel situations.

From the parents' perspective--again identified during the focus groups C is the suggestion that they need to work closely with their sons and daughters and practice with them while they have a learner's permit. Nationally, 87 percent of the states responding to the **Young Driver Questionnaire** require parents' permission for the learner's permit. However, only 47 percent of the states have a requirement for a minimum amount of supervised driving time (typically 50 hours) during the period that the young driver has a restricted or provisional permit. Currently, 57 percent of states involve parents in their young driver education programs.

As some parents indicated, parents need to have rules for their sons and daughters' driving. Further, they noted that other parents in the community should be involved with others' sons and daughters. "Parents are quick to give kids cars to drive. They need to make them earn it and to know that there are consequences if they get in trouble."

Elaborating on parents' potential role, key informants and Virginia DMV interviewees stated that parents need to talk with the police, the judge, and the defense attorney long before the young driver comes to the licensing ceremony. Parents need to set the rules and take greater control. They sometimes make it too easy for their children by giving them a car. The child may be a more responsible driver if the financial responsibility was part of their being permitted to drive. Further, parents need to understand their rights and responsibilities to be able to withdraw a license, restrict driving, and reduce privileges. Some respondents, unaware of the existence of such law, suggested that "perhaps we need a law to address this concern." This suggests that there is a need to better inform citizens of existing laws and policies pertaining to young drivers.

Among judges, many want to see parents more involved in all aspects of their child's driving experience, as opposed to the all too frequent separation of their responsibilities that often occurs when parents are no longer required to transport children to activities, work, and other settings. They believe that the majority of responsibility of teaching a child to drive lies with parents, and would like to make it mandatory that parents attend the ceremony/exercise when teens receive their license.

They would like to see parents become more directly involved in their children's driving activities. An increase in parent involvement is critical for young driver safety and training programs to be successful.

*Currently, Virginia's DMV emphasizes the parent role with several approaches. First, the parent must approve the application for a driver's license. Second, inherent in the licensing ceremony is the responsibility of the parent and the importance of the parental role; this is illustrated by the judge distributing the juvenile's driver's license to the parent, who subsequently decides when it is appropriate for their son/daughter to receive it. In addition, the parent has the capability to suspend the driver's license or learner's permit until their son/daughter is 18 years old. Finally, DMV has recently made available a publication, which helps parents communicate with their children about responsible, safe driving practices.*

## **Theme 2 - The Youth Role**

Young people are generally found to not have a significant role in determining the efforts surrounding their driving. Because of their relative inexperience in driving, decisions appear to be made without their involvement.

### **Finding 2a - Young drivers are generally viewed with skepticism.**

The approaches utilized in this data collection process showed that the perspective of the young driver is often viewed with skepticism. The young driver, when voicing his/her suggestions about capability of driving, is actually based on limited driving experience. As some individuals in the focus groups stated, many young drivers are actually not as well prepared as they think they are. Even young drivers state that the maturity level gets much higher as they get older. As one individual stated, "Very few 15- and 16-year-old kids can actually handle the responsibility because of their maturity level." Through these processes, young drivers acknowledge that their experience is relatively limited.

At the same time, they may face a desire to expand their driving responsibilities and opportunities. Some young drivers interviewed cautioned about not forgetting the responsible people; there are many responsible young drivers who are attempting to maintain a quality-driving situation. However, young people acknowledged their lack of experience and their relatively high level of aggressive driving and risk taking.

Parents interviewed during the focus groups are also concerned about the relative invincibility of young drivers. They suggest that youth need to pay more attention and should have more experience as they manage the variety of tasks inherent in driving an automobile. In the national interviews,

some individuals cited the poor decision making by young drivers when they drive. The pervasive theme is one of increasing the responsibility held by young drivers while behind the wheel of an automobile. This is found through the range of focus groups, as well as through the key informant interviews. This lack of experience when coupled with the desire for greater influence causes a concern about actually allocating this greater influence and decision-making.

Virginia DMV respondents reported that they noticed speed to be the leading characteristic about young people and their driving behaviors. Another point that was stressed was the lack of maturity exhibited by young drivers. Other respondents noted that inattention and inexperience are words that come to mind when describing young people and their driving behaviors. Furthermore, the use of cellular phones and the listening to loud music were also mentioned. School guidance counselors echoed these same themes.

Among judges, many believe that young drivers sincerely want to do the right thing and be careful. Yet, judges also see that the overall lack of driving experience among new young drivers contributed to problem behaviors. Some found young drivers to be exuberant, inexperienced drivers who take too many risks. Despite this contention, however, it is believed that young drivers are no more aggressive than the population at large. In fact, it is thought young drivers learn most of their behaviors from adults. Although aggressive driving was also cited as a frequently observed behavior, judges also cited young drivers who left their license at home, drove with no legal license, misjudged distance and failed to look ahead, thus causing rear end collisions.

Driving instructors noticed speeding to be the most common practice by new young drivers. Recklessness, inexperience, and inattention were also behaviors attributed to young drivers. Other driving instructors felt that young drivers carry too many passengers, which often results inattention to the road. Some respondents reported that peer pressure and the need to impress others are also contributing factors in inattentive or aggressive driving.

More than any other group of respondents, police officers report that the number one characteristic of young drivers is that they speed. Second on their list was that young drivers are disrespectful to the law. Among other police responses were descriptions that young drivers are inattentive, reckless drivers. Police officers reported that some of the contributing factors are drinking and driving, and aggressive driving. Inexperience and inattention were also listed as contributing factors. Furthermore, the need for young drivers to impress each other is also a risk that leads to bad driving.

### **Finding 2b - The youth perspective is not widely incorporated.**

Parallel to the first finding about skepticism regarding the youth perspective is the extent to which youth are involved in decision-making processes. The **Young Driver Questionnaire** distributed throughout the nation showed that 35 percent of the states responding indicated that young people are not involved at all in developing statewide programs and policies related to young drivers. On the

other hand, 54 percent indicate that youth participate in focus groups to discuss these policies and programs, while only 8 percent demonstrate that youth are represented on boards/commissions.

When asked about how organizations are involved in addressing licensing education and sanctioning in their state, the average rating for the involvement of youth groups or organizations was 2.5 on a 5-point scale with 1 equal “not at all involved” and 5 indicating “very involved.” This relatively low level of youth involvement nationwide is further supported with the national interviews conducted. A wide range of state agencies are involved in helping address concerns regarding young drivers; teen groups and school-based settings are cited but are noted as involved only to a limited degree. Throughout these national interviews and the focus groups conducted with youth and adults, relatively little discussion occurs about the involvement of youth in an advisory or decision-making manner. In summary, those involved with the various data collection approaches view the voice of youth as relatively inconsequential.

None of the key informants indicated that youth’s voice is heard in any of the processes related to young driver’s regulations and policies.

*One way in which Virginia’s DMV incorporates the youth perspective is by having the driver preparation activities conducted through a choice of settings. This helps attend to the unique needs (including language considerations) held by youth; it also helps assist with differences based on urban and rural setting (with driving preparation, both in the school and the commercial setting) being available throughout the state. Further, DMV has recently published a parent brochure, which emphasizes communication with youth about safe driving practices.*

### **Theme 3 - Understanding Youth**

This theme emphasizes a thorough understanding of youth and their driving habits. The content of this theme provides tremendous insight into the overall skills and abilities of youth as they address their responsibilities of operating a motor vehicle. The insights gathered from the specific data collection processes--surveys, interviews, and focus groups--all point toward the same conclusions regarding these findings. It is within the framework of these core findings that most future recommendations must be grounded. Further, as cited in the literature review, many of these factors are developmentally based. Thus, it will be important for future initiatives to ground efforts in the overall cognitive, emotional, and physical developmental processes of youth.

#### **Finding 3a - Youth have inadequately developed skills and abilities for safe driving.**

A theme that is overwhelmingly presented through all data collected is the limited skills and abilities held by youth as they begin their driving. National interview respondents emphasized inexperience

as the top-contributing factor regarding youth driving behaviors. This lack of skills from over-reacting to a situation, not having the skill to recover from an off-road incident and to under-reacting to situations all cause concern. These national interviews cited lack of judgment, immaturity, lack of knowledge, insufficient driver education, lack of skill, and not adjusting the driving style or behavior to factors such as the roadway, weather conditions, or time of day. When driver instructors were interviewed in a focus group, they cited that young people have more expectations for themselves than they can actually accomplish based on their abilities. They cite the need for greater behind-the-wheel training, including knowledge of the features of the automobile. Further, through the focus groups with both new young drivers and parents, this behind-the-wheel training is cited as important. This helps increase the specific experience that young people have as they learn to drive.

Parents and youth, both, in addition to the key informant interviews and the national interviews, cited the desire for greater involvement with parents or guardians in behind-the-wheel training and practice sessions. Thus, a consistent theme is to increase the experience found among the drivers for handling the wide range of challenges on the roadway. Parallel to this--to be cited within the next theme--are the tremendous increases acknowledged by state leaders, parents, youth, instructors, and others with changes in the settings within which driving occurs; that is, more cars are on the roadway and they appear to be moving faster than in years past.

Many interviewed judges see a lack of training and experience leading to errors of judgment, i.e., too much speed for the road and road conditions, or driver inattention. Young drivers, judges say, are easily distracted. This lack of focus has intensified as society continues to advance technologically. As a result of inexperience, many of the young drivers have little to no judgment when it comes to driving issues and they “falsely believe that they (and their actions) are invincible on the road.”

Police officers report that new young drivers are continuously exhibiting more aggressive attitudes toward driving. Other police officers feel that young drivers are even more inexperienced than before.

### **Finding 3b - Youth attitudes about driving cause safety concerns.**

The issue around the attitude of young people as they address driving is another significant concern demonstrated fairly unanimously across the various sources of information. The national interviews cite the attitudes of the feelings of invincibility and being risk takers in their driving. Linked to this is becoming easily distracted, lacking judgment, and being reckless in their driving behavior. Many young people have overconfidence and a disbelief in the susceptibility to consequences, according to these national interviews.

In a slightly different manner, many of the key informant interviews suggest that the early young drivers are more attentive to their driving because they acknowledge their lack of skill and experience, while those at a later age (those who have had a license for 2 or more years) may have

increased confidence, and although their experience is indeed greater, still lack a substantive amount of experience in driving in a wide range of situations and settings.

The focus groups conducted with new young drivers also cite the attitudes surrounding young drivers that can be problematic. These include the desire to drive everywhere, including finding a reason to drive a car. The attitude of invincibility couples with behaviors, such as not wearing a seatbelt and driving at excessive speeds, as well as driving aggressively. Some parents cited the attitude that youth hold about the automobile and their use as an expression of their new independence. On the other hand, some parents cited the attitude of being timid when driving and the need to increase the confidence. In the national **Young Driver Questionnaire**, respondents indicated that the driver education program in about half of the states responding say that working on attitude change is very much included in the education program. Similarly, about half of the states responding report that attention to the “psychology of driving courtesy” is very much included in the statewide young driver education program.

Several judges also believe that “young people have a false sense of immortality,” which often explains their willingness to “take unnecessarily dangerous risks.” They consistently “forget how dangerous operating a motor vehicle can be. The vast majority of young drivers are serious and cautious, however, a fair amount of young drivers who operate vehicles in Virginia do not hold a valid drivers license. They often take their parents’ cars without permission, and frequently engage in speeding and other forms of reckless driving.” Judges also think, “young people have a false sense of immortality,” which often explains their willingness to “take unnecessarily dangerous risks.” They consistently “forget how dangerous operating a motor vehicle can be. The vast majority of young drivers are serious and cautious, however, a fair amount of young drivers who operate vehicles in Virginia do not hold a valid drivers license. They often take their parents cars without permission, and frequently engage in speeding and other forms of reckless driving.”

### **Finding 3c - The context of driving can compromise driving safety.**

The context within which young drivers find themselves is another major concern with the young driver. A major concern with young drivers is inattention. This includes issues such as the involvement of other young people in the car as passengers, the engagement of music, cruising, and drinking and driving. The national interviews report that issues such as alcohol use, being tired, reckless driving, and being in a rush are common factors in concerns with young drivers. Cited in the national **Young Driver Questionnaire** is the fact that young drivers are easily distracted from their responsibilities of managing an automobile. This inattention can be coupled with some of the other factors very often cited by these national interviews, such as having other youth in the car which connects to peer pressure and showing off for their peers.

Linked with the attitude of immaturity, the lack of judgment is a factor associated with the context within which they are driving. The parent focus group focuses on the concern that they have when they have others in their cars. Parents indicate the issue of distraction and the confidence that young

drivers may feel when they have friends in their vehicle with them. Parents also cite the distraction found with cellular phones, as well as tuning the radio and putting a CD into the automobile's audio system. Youth, too, cite the careless driving that may occur, particularly as they show off with friends and respond to peer pressure. They also cite the distraction found with loud music and cellular phones and their desire to use the automobile for entertainment such as hanging out with friends. They indicate that coupled with their immaturity is the peer pressure about seeing how fast they can go on a particular road.

According to the **Young Driver Questionnaire**, drinking and driving and speeding are both very much a concern, as cited by 91 percent of the states responding. By contrast, reckless driving and aggressive driving are of concern by approximately three-fourths of the responding states. Inclusion in the young driver education programs by 44 percent of the states responding are "skills responding to others' aggressive driving," as well as "awareness of own aggressive driving and how to deal with it." Efforts by the states responding to address drinking and driving are very much included by 83 percent of the states responding, drug-impaired driving by 67 percent of the states responding, driving while distracted by 48 percent of the states responding, and drowsy driving by 26 percent; each of these is included at a level of "very much" by the responding states.

In an effort to address this contextual issue, states responding report that some restrictions are included. Specifically, two-thirds of the states responding prohibit young drivers from driving at night (typically between midnight and 5 a.m.). Nearly two-thirds of the states responding have these restrictions for 6 months or until the driver is 17 or 18. Passenger restrictions are incorporated by 45 percent of the states responding; this typically includes only one person in the front seat and no non-siblings riding with the young driver. These passenger restrictions, for 60 percent of the respondents, are valid until the young driver is 18 years old. Driving is also restricted, by 14 percent of respondents, to various locations; these are related to the restricted hours already cited.

Key informants emphasized two aspects in relation to youth driving: inexperience and risk taking. They stated that youth's inexperience and immaturity lead to more risk taking, speeding, unnecessary passing, etc. Young drivers have attended a driving program, but have not met the real challenges of the road. Risk taking is a result of the exuberance of youth, their invincibility, and not understanding the ultimate consequences of their actions. Sometimes only youthful good eyesight and reaction time avoid crashes. Every young driver is different and some have specific concerns such as coming from different cultures. They see things from the eyes of their parents and their culture. Young drivers do not fully appreciate situational risk and are easily swayed by peer social influences. They overestimate their driving ability and do not understand the seriousness of getting behind the wheel of a car; they do not realize how deadly it can be.

Virginia DMV interviewees highlighted factors such as "other passengers." Guidance counselors, too, cited "other passengers" as the most frequently contributing factor to crashes and accidents.

They also mentioned showing off, the use of cellular phones, and listening to music as lesser concerns.

Among judges, several also believe that peer pressure is the root of many traffic violations among young drivers. The judges find that most young drivers are not bad people, but instead are the product of a society “where everything is to be rushed--quick and instant.” Electronics are among the primary culprits of the distractibility that impacts so many young drivers, namely cell phones, complex CD players, portable computers and, in some cases, internet access.

**Finding 3d - Youth behaviors linked with driving can further compromise safety.**

Similarly, behaviors are cited among young drivers that affect their ability to be safe drivers and be protected in the event of a crash. The lack of seatbelts is found as an important issue for youth. This was cited through the national interviews, although at a lower level than the other three findings already indicated within this theme; however, the lack of youth wearing seatbelts was an issue of concern with new young drivers. Similarly, the issue of seatbelts was cited through the key informant interviews and in the range of focus groups. Greater attention to seat belts is provided by the drivers’ instructors who indicated that most of the young drivers do not wear seatbelts.

Other behaviors cited through the range of processes are speeding and reckless driving. These are major factors among those interviewed across the nation as a concern with young drivers. While the inexperience and attitudes and context of driving (the first three findings cited in this section) are contributing factors for problematic behavior, the specific behaviors identified with the young drivers are speeding and recklessness. These correlate with aggressive driving and unnecessary risk taking. In the focus groups with the new young drivers, the careless driving, aggressive driving, reckless driving, and speeding are noted, although with less emphasis. Parents, however, do cite the excessive speed and recklessness often found with the young driver. As noted in the **Young Driver Questionnaire**, speeding is very much a concern as cited by 89 percent of the respondents to the survey, coupled with reckless driving and aggressive driving.

Typical consequences for how speeding is addressed for drivers based on age suggest that the consequences will be harsher for those who are under 18, as compared with those 18 to 21, and those 18 to 21 in turn will be less severe than consequences for those over 21. The same finding is found for those involved with reckless driving and aggressive driving; that is, as the offending driver is younger, the consequences are more negative.

Another related issue is drinking and driving. As noted, this is very much a concern by 89 percent of the respondents to the **Young Driver Questionnaire** and is included in the state’s young driver education program at a level of “very much” by 81 percent of the respondents.

The same themes were reiterated by interviewees among Virginia DMV respondents and guidance counselors. Specifically, Virginia DMV interviewees mentioned drinking and driving and aggressive

driving as major concerns. Guidance counselors mentioned aggressive driving, drinking and driving, and speeding as common contributing factors.

Judges are alarmed by the blatant disregard that young drivers often have for the speed limit. They have seen many young drivers who have been cited for driving over 40 mph over the speed limit. There are more crashes related to speed, inattention, and lack of experience behind the wheel and a failure to use safety restraints.

*One approach recently undertaken by DMV to provide greater opportunities for juvenile drivers to gain experience with driving is to permit them to obtain a learner's permit at age 15. Since an unrestricted driver's license cannot be obtained until age 16, this allows for a full twelve months of supervised driving to occur prior to this time.*

#### **Theme 4 - Changes in Youth and Society**

A range of societal factors surrounds youthful driving. These are important to understand as they provide the context within which youth are indeed driving on the highways, as well as for determining appropriate and meaningful strategies, education, and regulations to promote safer driving habits and skills.

##### **Finding 4a - The context of youthful driving is substantively different today.**

Multiple sources of information used in this study identified the fact that learning to drive an automobile today is much different than when they (the adults) learned to drive. This observation emerges from the fact that there are more automobiles on the highways, the relative speed of driving automobiles is faster, and the style of driving includes a higher level of aggressive driving behavior. Coupled with this is the observation that cars are of an improved quality, promoting higher speed and suggesting greater safety to the driver, potentially resulting in increased risk-taking behavior.

A related issue with the cultural context is the observed increased need for youth to be handling multiple responsibilities. Not only do they attend school, but they are also actively involved in work, social activities, clubs, and recreational events. These increased responsibilities are also coupled with the increased responsibilities as a family member who helps a parent run errands or transport other siblings. Some parents in the focus group indicated that young people now have more things to do which require driving. As one parent said, "They drive more than us when we were young." Reflecting on the power of the car, one parent indicated, "New cars have so much power; they stop and start fast and their actions are quick. Kids do not have the skills to start or stop a car efficiently, especially in times of emergency."

As noted in the theme on parents, many parents are pleased to give their children the responsibility for driving an automobile. Parents suggest that it would be more helpful if greater responsibility was held by the parent when determining whether the son/daughter is ready to drive safely, monitoring the driving training, and establishing standards for the son/daughter with their driving. A related factor cited by parents on the changing culture is that many youths possess their own automobiles; as one parent said, “They get their own expensive cars now as they know that it is their parents’ money and parents are going to pay for it.”

Parents also cite the peer pressure that youth face even in the face of parental standards. For example, some children are told they can have only one person in the car. Parents acknowledge that they cannot really monitor them at school and that if a peer asks for a ride and says “I am desperate; I won’t tell anyone, the youth may decide to give a ride to that person and then ultimately bring other people along with him.”

The national interviews helped to further support this finding with comments that youth may feel overconfident, invulnerable, and not susceptible to consequences facing their driving. This may be in part based on the nature of the automobile that they are using. They note clearly that there are more cars on the road, that young people are driving faster and fancier cars, and that, in fact, there is an increased number of young drivers. These are coupled with drinking and driving, aggressive driving, and reckless driving behaviors.

Guidance counselors seemed to have a fairly positive view of these changes. They found that there are more cars on the road and that younger people have become better drivers. They also suggested that new cars are safer, people are using seatbelts, and there is more access to cars. Yet, they indicated that there seems to be less parental control. Virginia DMV interviews indicated that new young drivers in recent years do not value their licenses and are less responsible. On a positive note, however, several respondents among DMV personnel and guidance counselors noted that new young drivers are using seatbelts more often than before.

Several judges pointed to the fact that many of the more reckless drivers in the county do not have a valid license; this may be the result of a system that requires applicants to “jump through too many hoops” when applying for a license. Judges also noted that more young drivers have expensive and high-powered cars today. Often “young drivers lack the skill and experience to handle the mechanical aspects of these more powerful and sophisticated vehicles.” Also noted is the increase in the number of teens who own cars or have full-time access to a family car. This is attributed to the strong economy and growing prosperity in Northern Virginia. By purchasing additional household cars, parents often hope to alleviate household tensions and time constraints between themselves and their children in an increasingly busy and hectic society.

Several of instructors who were interviewed reported that new young drivers are more aggressive and are getting worse. Several among them also noted that, along with the need to impress others, young drivers are not fully ready to drive yet.

**Finding 4b - Driving is increasingly perceived as a right among youth.**

Through the variety of processes, parents and youth indicated their view that many youths view driving as a right. This is linked to the previous finding yet holds merit as its own. Youth are reported to be driving to school and not taking the public transportation at the same level as earlier. Primarily through the focus groups with young drivers and their parents, the theme of driving being a right, particularly in the social setting among their peers, is inherent among youth. Coupled with the parents' desire to get their son/daughter driving, again there are perceptions that there is a right for their son/daughter to be driving earlier, thereby easing some of the logistical concerns in the family with transporting these young people as well as their siblings. Some young drivers report a desire to "want to drive everywhere" and find a reason to drive a car. Young people report using a car for entertainment, so they can hang out with their friends.

The importance of the automobile in the life of a young person is noted through some of the key informant interviews, as well as by youth. One illustration is having the requirement that the young driver, as the sanction imposed for violation of a traffic safety law, must ride a school bus and be documented as doing so for the term of the restriction. Some individuals in fact are mandated to ride public transportation (not a school bus, but a local bus) as part of their sanction. This has been viewed by the young person as humiliating, further stressing the importance of the automobile in their social setting.

*Judges emphasize the responsibilities associated with driving in the Driver Licensing ceremony. Further, the role of parents is emphasized in this ceremony, with the state's parental policy, and with the recently published booklet for parents regarding preparation of the young driver.*

**Theme 5 - Driver Education**

Consistent through the processes of this project was the call for a revamping of the driver education program. This study did not provide much attention to the specific curriculum components offered through the driver education program; the primary attention was in the manner in which it is administered and the direct relevance for engaging the youth participants in this. The seven findings outlined help to illustrate the breadth of perspectives in this overall theme.

**Finding 5a B Allocated hands-on driving skills training is inadequate.**

The range of sources of information for this study consistently suggest that increased attention to driving skills is essential for preparing the young driver to handle driving more safely. This

complements the call for increased attention by parents and the preparation of their sons and daughters for driving. The **Young Driver Questionnaire** demonstrates that perceptual skills and decision-making are promoted very much in the driver education program. However, skills responding to others' aggressive driving are found at this high level in 47 percent of the states responding. Defensive driving skills are cited by 81 percent of the states responding.

In the focus group with driver instructors, they emphasize responsibility towards other drivers. They state that if "you can't think, you can fail." They further emphasize that "driving is business." Once the student understands that, they become more interested in learning good driving skills. Even these instructors state that 36 hours of classroom time is not enough and that the time for teaching driver education is limited, and with a low level of content in the materials in the textbooks. Through the parent focus groups, an emphasis was provided for both more behind the wheel, on-the-road training and more classroom training. Some parents suggested that the classes and behind the wheel training should be longer as "you can't learn much in a 9-week class." Parents were critical of some youth saying "they are not patient; the practical experience should be more because the driver education is not enough." Another parent further emphasizes the importance of skills-based experience, promoting more extensive practice; as one parent stated, "Sometimes my daughter gets confused and asks if she can turn left when there is a green light."

The national interviews further support this finding, suggesting that there is a lack of, or insufficient, driver education. Overwhelmingly, the inexperience of their lack of knowledge and skills are cited as major contributing factors with the negative consequences found with young drivers. They call for modifying driver education to include both curriculum development and expanding the educational process.

Key informants emphasized that parents 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. In addition to the parental role, they also suggested extending the learning period over a period of several years, "We could take some of the glamour out of getting the driver's license and could result in a considerable amount of teaching time available--develop more skills during this time." Among their recommendations were suggestions suggested using everything technology has to offer--internet sites, videotapes and giving youth more real-world driving experiences (instant lane-change drill and other road maneuvers at a driving track).

### **Finding 5b - Driver education lacks sufficient practical training.**

Not only is more extensive attention needed to the skills inherent in driver education, but a need exists for teaching young drivers more than about how to drive. Specifically, driver education is encouraged to help familiarize the young driver with the automobile and its features, including its assets and limitations. They need to be taught how to handle roadside emergencies, such as providing oil and gas as well as how to change a tire. There are also calls for training young drivers how to respond in emergency situations, such as returning the automobile to the road after coming off

the shoulder of the road; there is a tendency for youth to over-react to that type of situation. According to the national interviews, there is an inability to determine proper safety margins or make appropriate adjustments to driving style. They further cite that some youth do not adjust their driving style or behavior to the type of road (urban, rural, interstate), weather conditions, or time of day. Driving instructors suggest that youth need to know the features of the automobile they are driving. Even young drivers' comments through the focus groups suggest that some of the practical tips need to include how to change flat tires; "This is more important than books and videos in the driver education class."

Key informants had strong views regarding driver education. They stated the need to overhaul driver education, to develop a more meaningful program with more technology involved, and to better address risk-taking. They also suggested increasing the time in the classroom and in the car. They also echoed similar concerns about how the required 9 hours on the road are actually utilized.

Virginia DMV interviewees indicated that there is more need for training and the use of video simulators. Guidance counselors indicated that better training for young drivers would be beneficial.

#### **Finding 5c - Young drivers' anticipation and response to situations are inadequate.**

Not only do young drivers need greater attention with driving and practical skills, but they also need instruction in how to anticipate situations. In the national interviews, the concerns cited about speeding, reckless driving, unnecessary risk taking, and aggressive behavior, particularly when coupled with the lack of experience with the young drivers, suggest even greater attention to helping youth anticipate and prevent problems related to driving. Through driver's education, greater attention to the role that these risky behaviors play can be helpful in preventing needless deaths and injuries. The national interviews suggest providing more information and resources and campaigns that address these and other issues such as seatbelts and drinking and driving. However, they do find that the attention to these latter two issues has improved, resulting in a reduction in problems in this regard.

Several information sources called upon the need for greater courtesy and responsibility with reference to other drivers. The driver instructors suggested greater emphasis on responsibility towards other drivers. One parent reported that her child said that "it would be really nice if everybody drove courteously." This helps to offset the negative and risk taking-behaviors often found.

With the **Young Driver Questionnaire**, the concern cited for drinking and driving, speeding, reckless driving, and aggressive driving were very much a concern, with drinking and driving and speeding being slightly more important than the other two. Through this national survey, the psychology of driving courtesy is emphasized in driver education program "somewhat" by 53 percent of the respondents and "Avery much" by 43 percent of respondents. Perceptual skills in decision-making is emphasized "Avery much" by 77 percent of respondents and an attitude change, aiming at

reducing one's own risky behavior, is evenly split between "very much" and "somewhat" regarding the extent to which they are included in the driver education program. An emerging area of drowsy driving is only "somewhat" included by 77 percent of state respondents, while 23 percent included that topic "very much."

In this regard, key informants also suggested giving youth more real-world driving experiences, such as instant lane-change drills and other road maneuvers at a driving track. They also suggested that police officers come into driver's education and talk with students. Another suggestion was to invite a high school student who has been involved in a bad crash to talk to the class about his or her real crash experience.

Several judges had a more positive view on driver education. They stated that, overall, driver's education has done a good job and improvement has been seen in recent years compared to the past. However, more violations are being committed by young females, especially speeding, than in the past.

**Finding 5d - Driver education does not include sufficient interactive elements or use of technology.**

Primarily the young people interviewed call for the emphasis on a higher level of interaction in the driver education program. Specifically, one focus group said that "the driver's education course needs to change." Even the instructors say that it is important to help young people believe in what the instructor emphasizes. "If you are reading a book or showing a video, they will forget it, and it will be over. If you carry it one step further, it would become part of their life and that is the kind of teacher I want to be. I try to make it entertaining." Inherent in this is the observation by instructors and parents, as well as leaders throughout the states responding, that many youth simply want to get the driver's license (see earlier finding on the "right" associated with a driver's license) and do not particularly care about the instruction and experience they are gaining in the driver education class. With the national interviews with state leaders, attention is provided to improved driver education through modification of its content and curriculum.

Driver education in and of itself is cited as mandatory by 64 percent of the respondents in the national **Young Driver Questionnaire**. Virtually all respondents show that driver education, whether in a school setting or in a private driving school, blends theoretical and practical approaches. Most respondents report that driver education includes a combination of 30 hours of in-class instruction, as well as 6 hours of practical behind-the-wheel instruction.

Regarding the use of technology, approximately 50 percent of the states responding report using driving simulators. In virtually all the cases, these are used for educational purposes (as contrasted with road testing for purposes found in only a few states responding). Currently, use of a driving simulator is found as a supplemental or substitute tool rather than a required tool (which was found in only three states). When the state uses simulators, over half of the 14 respondents indicated that they

used steering wheels and pedals, 29 percent used CD-ROMs, and 14 percent use Virtual Reality. In virtually all cases, the simulators are commercially purchased.

Use of simulators paralleled this desire for increased simulation type of activity in the classroom. They emphasize that this could be where a young person can go after school or during study hall and work on it; this may be a requirement to spend so much time on a simulator, at which time the young person could “simulate experiences like someone pulling out in front of you, and you could kind of actually have that experience.” Young people also state that “we should be able to practice making mistakes so that we know what happens but not be punished in our grades. We have to learn.” Other youth talk about the use of technological materials like Nintendo’s, Play Stations, and Dreamcast. “They could make a game for it and just buy one of those. It would be a lot cheaper and just have the kids play with the controllers or if they make a steering wheel, it would be lot cheaper than buying a whole simulation unit.” Youth report that with the new systems, new technology, better graphics and games with many more situations can emerge. Overall, the youth suggest the use of technology can help because “anything that you are exposed to in regard to driving is going to help. It cannot be detrimental. Experience, I think, is what it’s all about.” These resources can be helpful in promoting that type of hands-on experience.

The driver instructors reported that they use video game situations and computers, as well as magnetic boards and overheads, in order to help promote interaction in the classroom, and to keep students interested.

In addition to the use of technology, key informants also suggested asking students to write a story and get it published on underage drinking, as a way of improving interaction in the classroom. They also suggested that students do their own research, do a media presentation, and get it published. Ultimately, they emphasized the need to give youth correct information in an interesting, attention-getting way.

#### **Finding 5e - There is an apparent inconsistency between identified state needs and current emphasis of training activities.**

As noted in the **Young Driver Questionnaire**, drinking and driving are very much a concern by 89 percent of the respondents. However, during the examination of the extent to which these issues are included in the driver education program it was found that drinking and driving is included at a level of “very much” by 81 percent of the states responding and “somewhat” by 19 percent of the states responding. Similarly, while aggressive driving behavior is very much a concern as cited by 68 percent of the states responding, skills of responding to others’ aggressive driving, as well as awareness of one’s own aggressive driving and how to deal with it, is included at a level of “very much” in driver education by 47 percent of the states responding. While these types of driving behaviors (aggressive driving, drinking and driving, reckless driving, and speeding) are noted in the national survey as well as cited by state personnel in the national interviews, the attention to what should be emphasized in driver education does not come forward. The discussions with the

instructors, while they mention some of these issues, do not demonstrate that these concerns are indeed emphasized in the driver education curriculum. Key informants suggested, as a first step towards improving the driver education program, to conduct studies to determine what does and does not work.

**Finding 5f - There is a challenge of linking school-based instructional needs with driver education.**

Increasingly, state education systems are incorporating statewide standards for schools and their curriculum. Through the key informant interviews and some of the interviews with leaders in the other states, the attention to driver education has some apparent inconsistency with the school district's emphasis upon teaching and student scores on standardized tests; that is, with calls for increasing emphasis on driver education for young drivers, there is not a parallel emphasis in the statewide educational standards. The priority appears to go towards the areas and issues emphasized in the statewide educational standards about which drivers education is not included.

**Finding 5g - The court assigned driver improvement courses are viewed as less effective.**

Through the focus groups with young drivers, the court assigned driver improvement courses are viewed as the least effective. As one individual stated, "We go in the class and then the instructor doesn't even care if we sleep or walk out of the classroom." Another individual states, "The instructor repeats the things over and over again and then makes us watch videos that are horrible; even the instructor leaves the class during that time and then comes back later." Further, another individual stated that "Even the defensive driver instructors are in a hurry, so it is worse. My defensive driving instructor said that he also got a ticket. According to me then, he is not supposed to be the defensive driving instructor."

Some judges had varied views on those issues. Specifically, one judge would like to see the implementation of better driver safety education programs statewide. He would like to see all young drivers complete a comprehensive driver improvement classes, which he believes is better than the current school-based instruction. Another judge suggested improved guidelines and curriculum for instructing the driver education courses; he would also like to see current films for use in these courses. He would also like greater flexibility in the curriculum, including a remedial course as well as a more intensive program.

*The Virginia DOE with a Highway Safety grant from DMV is currently undertaking a review of the curriculum used to prepare young drivers, with upgrades intended. The recently lowered age for obtaining a learner's permit focuses attention upon the shared responsibility for preparing the juvenile driver. That is, the DMV believes that the responsibility for driver education should be shared by the driver education program. The age 15 for a learner's permit provides greater time for juvenile drivers to practice safe driving with a learner's permit (under the guidance of a parent/guardian), and was intended to provide greater practice time and emphasize the parental role.*

## **Theme 6 - Organization and Oversight**

The relationships among several organizations and agencies dealing with young driver issues have been traditionally designed to include certain organizations and agencies in the decision making process, while excluding or reducing the roles played by others. In addition, the fact that the function of driver education is shared between high schools and private schools, with split supervision by the State Department of Education and the State Department of Motor Vehicles, poses challenges.

### **Finding 6a - Relationships among organizations do not support wide collaboration.**

The collaboration among agencies and organizations, which helps address the preparation and monitoring of young drivers, is not systematic or complete. Currently involved are the State Department of Motor Vehicles, State Department of Education, instructors in the school setting, instructors from private companies, and insurance companies. Each of these currently has a role to play in the implementation and monitoring of driver education, and would benefit from some more clearly defined responsibilities. Through the key informant interviews, it appears that there are different standards of quality for the implementation of the instruction, depending on whether there is a private or public setting for the curriculum implementation. Monitoring of the school curriculum is handled by the State Department of Education, while the State Department of Motor Vehicles handles the monitoring of the private sector instruction. It appears that there is some inconsistency of standards regarding what needs to be covered and ways in which young drivers in Virginia are prepared for their responsibilities in handling an automobile on the highways. Similarly, an examination of ways of better incorporating insurance companies could be undertaken, including attention to their information and resources as well as incentives and disincentives. Virginia would benefit from using these organizations more effectively.

From a national perspective, similar collaboration and similar lack of consistent involvement of a range of state groups and organizations is noted. When asking state highway safety personnel about

the level of involvement of a variety of groups in licensing education and sanctioning in their state, results from the **Young Driver Questionnaire** show that the state motor vehicle agency was rated the highest with a rating of 4.30 on a 5-point scale (with 1 indicating “not at all involved” and 5 indicating “very involved”). This was immediately followed by the Governor’s Highway Safety Office (4.29), the state police (4.00), and the state department of education (3.91). Rated at the bottom of this listing were the state medical advisory board (2.11); parents groups, (2.18), citizen advisory groups, (2.35) and state department of health (2.35); and youth groups (2.50), state insurance regulatory agencies and associations (2.73) and governor’s substance abuse coordinators (2.54). The state ABC is rated at 2.41, and the AAA chapter is rated at 3.50. Interviews with individuals with state responsibilities from around the nation revealed that a primary effort to address young driver issues has been collaboration; for many this has been cited as successful, while others indicate that much more needs to be done.

Consistent with this theme from these state officials is the desire to further promote these inter-organizational relationships. While the state officials are interested in increased federal funding and increased federal recommendations, they do not want to see federal mandates. Specifically, many individuals report that “the federal government should stay out of the state’s business.” Thus, federal assistance with supporting driver education, promoting incentives for programs, helping to develop national driver education curricula, providing technical assistance, and offering research opportunities, the overwhelming interest was for states to make decisions about these initiatives on their own.

**Finding 6b - The role of private companies in conducting driving curriculum could be posing problems.**

This finding is offered because of some of the concerns generated from the key informant interviews that illustrated that there may be some concerns with the implementation of driver education curricula by private agencies in the state. One concern has to do with a potential conflict of interest because of the certification process. On the one hand, a private agency is interested in getting as many youth trained and certified and wants to be known for high quality preparation of young drivers. On the other hand, if they develop a reputation of not passing certain drivers at a relatively high level, this may negate (from a marketing perspective) some of their own business potential. They may be viewed as actually promoting additional business by causing individuals to repeat the course, as promoting additional business by “being easy” on requirements and skills preparation. Thus, through some key informant interviews, it is reported that there may be a conflict of interest.

Another issue reported through the same process was the questionable preparation that individuals have to teach these courses. Private companies are reported to be able to hire whomever they please; however, it is reported that these individuals in the school setting are required to have specific training to teach driver education courses. A similar question arises in the preparation of the individuals to teach the driver education courses. Overall, this needs to be reviewed to determine the appropriateness of the private agencies implementing the curriculum.

Also expressed in some of the interviews with individuals from various states is a call for more uniform curriculum and uniform application of the curriculum. While some individuals interviewed call for this across all states, others are suggesting that, within Virginia the curriculum implemented should be consistent. From a national perspective, 83 percent of the respondents to the **Young Driver Questionnaire** report that the curriculum is standardized across the state, while 17 percent indicate that it is a blend of state and local standards.

**Finding 6c Some aspects of preparation and oversight of instructors are not adequate.**

As indicated above, the preparation of instructors by private driver education schools is not clear nor specific. This preparation is based on the reported hiring procedures without a formal certification process. Similarly, with the public school setting, the preparation and oversight of these instructors and the implementation of the curriculum are not clear. Nationally, 94 percent of states report (from the **Young Driver Questionnaire**) that providers of driver training and education to prospective young drivers be certified. Two states, or 6 percent, report that such certification is not required. Some of the comments from the young drivers in the focus groups suggest the concern about the quality of the instructors as cited in the discussion about drivers' improvement, some of the instructors are not monitoring the class and generally are reported to not engaging the novice drivers.

*A review of the commercial driving establishments was undertaken recently, and insights were gained to improve the processes and oversights used. The state DMV currently monitors the licensing of these commercial driving schools, who use the same curriculum that is used by the state public and private schools.*

**Theme 7 - Enforcement, Consistency, and Judicial Role**

This theme emphasizes the fact that a variety of agencies and individuals are addressing young driver issues and that consistency is needed to maximize the message being heard by young drivers and their parents. All too often, inconsistent messages are being communicated thereby undermining the potential for a safety-oriented priority with youth.

**Finding 7a - Lack of consistency appears to exist between the actions of police officers and judges.**

Reported through the interviews conducted with officials at local levels, as well as through the key informant interviews, there is an apparent ongoing tension between police and judges. Often the police officers reported not pulling a young driver over when an infraction has been observed.

Similarly, an officer may not arrest or cite the individual when an infraction has occurred. Thus, youth may not view this type of infraction as important.

Several judges reported that they believe that not enough driving under the influence charges are made by police. Some feel the “good old boys” in their area send the young drivers back to the parents and that they don’t learn; therefore, they become repeat offenders.

**Finding 7b Judges' roles may positively affect youth behavior.**

The key informant interviews stress the important role that a judge plays in shaping how young drivers are viewed in the state. Some judges reported how citizens, including parents and youth, modify their behaviors based on modifications of how the judge handles issues citing young drivers in their courtroom. The clear influence that judges have in the surrounding community is best illustrated by their own testimony about shifts in community behavior based on shifts in the judges' behavior and handling of these cases.

However, it must be noted that some judges have gone to the driver education classes on occasion, but did not find that their presence was effective. The teachers didn't feel that the judge "being seen as their friend" was effective. The teachers think the judge seems less important to them "coming to their level." Therefore, it appears that discretion is needed in deciding what roles are appropriate for judges beyond their traditional role.

**Finding 7c There is a need for increased enforcement.**

Key informants suggested that several aspects of enforcement need to be improved. Among these, they suggested a need to increase the level of enforcement around the schools, as they believe that a police presence will help due to the dominance of young drivers in these areas, especially before and after the school day. They also suggested that there is not a need for any additional laws regarding young drivers; there is simply the need to enforce the laws already on the books.

An emphasis within these interviews was that judges take a closer look at the seriousness of the individual cases on their dockets, as addressing even relatively small violations involving young drivers can serve as a deterrent for these youths.

They also voiced the need to increase incentives or penalties associated with non seat belt use by novice drivers, since youth have low belt-use rates and high crash rates. Also suggested was the serious consideration that might be given to waiving the insurance deductible if a person in a crash wears a seat belt, as a way of incentive.

Guidance counselors and Virginia DMV interviewees also emphasized the need for increased and better enforcement. This was reiterated by driver instructors who believed that the driving age should be raised, in addition to more enforcement by the police. Local judges also suggested the need to strengthen DMV-based rules and regulations to reduce abuse of the system; one example cited by one judge was the forging of parental signatures on documents.

*Through the emphasis on the Juvenile Licensing Ceremony, judges' roles and influence on both youth and parents are highlighted.*

## Theme 8 - Perspective of the Graduated Drivers License

Graduated Drivers Licensing (GDL) is often cited by many as the best way to address the preparation of young drivers and implementation of laws and strategies to monitor and maintain safety surrounding young drivers. In fact, the individuals interviewed in the key informant interviews often pointed to the GDL as a panacea. This theme addresses issues surrounding the GDL initiative.

### **Finding 8a - The GDL is viewed as a panacea.**

Graduated drivers licensing is viewed by many as the most helpful strategy to address young driver concerns; in large part, the GDL is seen as a panacea. Through the interview process, many cited the desire for Virginia to implement a GDL program; however, they often had different perspectives about what, specifically, a GDL program might incorporate. A GDL program is often touted as the best way to address the needs surrounding young drivers. With the interviews with state personnel throughout the country, a new GDL program is cited by many as the effort made by various organizations and agencies to address these concerns. Many suggest that they would like their state to consider implementing GDL laws. When asked about any other models, programs or approaches used by other states that they are aware of, the GDL programs of neighboring states are clearly cited as the top priority through this interview process.

Some driver instructors feel that GDL along with more policies and training programs should be implemented in their localities regarding new young drivers. Other instructors feel that there is a need for increased parental involvement as well as more enforcement.

### **Finding 8b The definitions of GDL vary.**

Through the **Young Driver Questionnaire**, 87 percent of the responding states responding indicated that they have a graduated licensing system implemented in their states, while 13 percent (5 of the 38 states responding to this question) indicated that they did not have this system. At the same time, there are differential responses as to the types of elements that are included. For example, parents' permission is required by 86 percent of the responding states for the learner's permit. Similarly, a mandatory holding period before moving to the intermediate stage is specified by 81 percent of the respondents, and 68 percent indicate their requirement that they have a minimum amount of supervised driving. For the intermediate stage, minimum requirements are cited by 81 percent of respondents, and restricted night driving by young drivers are implemented by 63 percent of the states responding. Forty-seven percent of respondents require supervised driving, and an equal percentage of respondents have passenger restrictions. A total of 47 percent of overall respondents have a standard during this intermediate stage of school performance, including issues such as grades and attendance. Thus, with this variation among respondents, states may indicate that they have a graduated licensing system when in fact they have components of what is selected by the generally perceived model of GDL which is held by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

The key informant responses included various depictions of what GDL represents. For example, some respondents expressed a comprehensive need for passenger restrictions on 16 year-old drivers, night time driving restriction, mandatory seat belt law, an incentive plan for good drivers, and require parental certification of a minimum number of hours driven. Others viewed GDL as a model based on a full graduated system with some restrictions on high risk driving when you first get your license. Still others provided a more general notion of GDL which is regarded as “steps that build a person up to be more competent before they began to drive independently. Among interviewees at the local level (including DMV employees, guidance counselors, police, and judges) some stated that they would like to see the state adopt a policy that restricts new young drivers from nighttime driving until they have reached a pre-stated level of experience. Others suggested that they would like to see the implementation of a new policy that will restrict the number of passengers that young drivers can have in their car at any given time. Generally, these local personnel seemed to endorse the ideas of having stricter policies as well as more awareness programs focused on preparing young drivers, however, they were not uniform in which policies should be adopted. One issue that was suggested by several individuals, including police, was that the driving age ought to be increased.

**Finding 8c - Curfews can be a part of a graduated drivers licensing initiative.**

The curfew laws are used in varying degrees in states throughout the nation. Of the respondents, 29 percent report having a statewide curfew law and 29 percent report not having a statewide curfew law. Further, 32 percent of states responding report that local jurisdictions are authorized to mandate their own curfew laws and 9 percent state that at least some local jurisdictions have actually mandated their own curfew laws. No states indicate that none of their jurisdictions are authorized to mandate their own curfew laws. In Virginia, jurisdictions are allowed to adopt their own curfew laws. An examination of these laws was conducted in 1996, and at that time a total of 100 jurisdictions implemented the curfew laws. In the follow-up review as part of this study, changes were made with 16 jurisdictions. Of these, 8 added curfew laws and 8 deleted their previously existing curfew laws. Virginia DMV interviewees were among those who favored a consideration of enacting local curfew laws for local youth.

In one of the focus groups with youths, curfews promoted youth “speeding to meet curfew limits” suggesting a potential negative corollary of curfew laws. In the urban setting, greater emphasis is placed on speeding, while in the more rural setting, concerns revolve around curfew laws and drinking and driving.

On the other hand, the prevailing view among key informants was that the time periods when people in Virginia are involved in crashes were not times when restrictions (curfews) were used. Thus, the inclusion of curfews in a GDL model was not promoted by key informants. Some judges suggested that they supported a driver curfew for young drivers under the age of 18 unless they are coming or going to work during the specified curfew hours.

*A review of the range of approaches often found with a graduated licensing program clearly shows the diversity of interpretation of this approach. Virginia, in fact, incorporates many of the items typically suggested as part of a GDL program. Regarding curfew laws, Virginia has legislation which allows local jurisdictions the opportunity to pass curfew laws for their own jurisdictions.*

### **Theme 9 - Urban and Rural Distinctions**

This theme focuses on distinctions that occur both from the driver's point of view, as well as the implementation of preparation and monitoring regarding differences within urban and rural settings. Through the Virginia interviews, as well as national interviews, distinctions are found among the range of settings.

#### **Finding 9a - Distinctions exist between urban and rural area.**

The distinctions between urban and rural settings are fairly obvious from the points of view of traffic, aggressive drivers, speed of drivers, as well as the nature of the roads themselves (interstates, well-trafficked areas, rural secondary roads which lack guard rails, shoulders and include curbs and lower safe speed limits). Similarly, the perspective of the individuals training the drivers, the parents, and the youth themselves have some distinctions.

Examining the focus groups, two were conducted in a rural setting, and one was more urban based. The more urban-based setting cited a higher level of aggressive driving while the theme with the more rural setting looked increasingly at the social involvement of youth with automobiles. Concerns in the more urban setting were with insurance rates, while those in the rural setting dealt with immaturity and peer pressure.

#### **Finding 9b - Programs are typically implemented with the assumptions of an urban setting.**

Through the process of conducting the interviews with individuals throughout the state, as well as across the nation, the general assumption is one of an urban setting. While many of these respondents were in rural or more suburban settings, the typical frame of reference for making observations about young drivers with a focus on aggressive driving, reckless driving, drinking and driving, and inexperience focuses on their need to operate in the urban environment. Particularly with the finding that the setting surrounding driving automobiles has changed with greater congestion, speed of cars, and increased aggressive driving, the assumption through all these is one of an urban setting. Even some of the traditionally rural areas in Virginia include greater congestion with higher levels of traffic on narrow roads and roads that are not as fully developed.

Some of the policies and perspectives, such as the parents taking more time with youth, are of a greater need and higher priority in the urban and suburban settings. This may not have the same level of effect in the more rural setting. Similarly, some of the policies and rules that are identified for the urban setting may not be of as high a priority in the rural setting, such as hours of night not allowed to drive or driving supervision. These may best be handled in the rural settings by parents and their own standards to promote safety.

In a similar way, issues of grades and attendance, which were challenged by some of the respondents in the parent focus groups, while promoted by 39 percent of the states responding nationwide, may be more of an urban response to addressing the intermediate stage restrictions for young drivers and not as appropriate in the rural setting. Attention can also be paid to the preparation of the rural driver who drives in the city so that he/she can be better equipped to deal with the crowding found in a city and the high speeds found in interstate settings.

*Virginia accommodates the diversity of jurisdictional settings by having driver education programs locally administered within the context of a standardized state curriculum. Localities may enact curfew laws and conduct driver licensing ceremonies in the manner deemed most appropriate for the setting.*

### **Theme 10 - Need for Evaluation and Dissemination**

The need for evaluation is included in many projects and studies, particularly with the implementation of new strategies and processes, such as GDL. Many jurisdictions do not have the infrastructure to implement a sound evaluation or methodology. Similarly, many individuals at the local level, as well as the state level, are not aware of the new approaches being implemented in other settings.

#### **Finding 10a - Limited evaluation exists on young driver issues.**

Not only does limited evaluation exist regarding many of the innovative strategies being used to deal with young drivers, but sound evaluation on a long-term basis, particularly with scientific approaches which minimize threats to internal validity and the inclusion of legitimate comparison groups, is sorely lacking. Specifically, from a national perspective, only 19 percent of states responding to the Young Driver Questionnaire have done any studies to assess the outcome of its license requirements for young drivers; 68 percent of respondents indicated that they have not done this, and 13 percent reported that they do not know. Similarly, only 26 percent of states responding report having any statistics on the number of young drivers who failed to pass the licensing requirements implemented by the state; 48 percent reported “no” and 26 percent reported “don’t know.”

Through the key informant interviews, many individuals were not aware of results which evaluated the implementation of strategies to address young drivers or that these were programmatic, licensing

or enforcement strategies. Many did report insights regarding the relative effectiveness of these approaches but typically did not have scientific data or quasi-experimental data to support their perspective. However, they were cognizant of the benefits of ongoing research and evaluation efforts; they stated that states with significant data collections have seen better ability to address their problems and address change in the level of safety. They can better know what is happening by, for example, linking emergency room reports, hospital discharge data, and police reports. The future for highway safety, as defined by crash prevention, is tied to successful community highway safety programs. “When communities take on an issue, the behavior in the community changes.”

**Finding 10b - Limited awareness of what others are doing to address young drivers is found.**

Also found in the key informant interviews was the fact that the majority of individuals were not aware of programs or findings implemented in other jurisdictions, whether in the state or in other states across the nation, which were used to address safety with young drivers. Through the interviews with state officials nationwide, while many of those interviewed were aware of other states’ GDL programs and sometimes with NHTSA programs, a substantive number were not aware of other models, programs, services, policies, laws, or practices implemented in other states. With the focus groups as well as with the driving instructors, the general response was that if any understanding of other approaches to addressing young drivers was noted, this was quite vague at best.

*Virginia has already undertaken assessment of the commercial driver licensing program, and is currently reviewing the curriculum used with driver education. The current report provides an evaluative assessment of Virginia’s approaches, including both quantitative and qualitative measures; further, it contains some additional national contextual information and insights.*

### **Theme 11 - Emerging Approaches**

This theme is identified to illustrate many of the approaches, other than GDL, that have been cited to help assist with young drivers. While specific attention was provided to technology in the **Young Driver Questionnaire**, other approaches were identified through the series of interviews, key informant interviews, focus groups, and literature review.

**Finding 11a A range of proactive programs exist.**

Coupled with the previous cited findings of lack of evaluation and limited dissemination of approaches, there are a range of strategies that might be viewed as “promising” or “potentially effective” in addressing young drivers. Through the key informant interviews, the driver licensing ceremony used in Virginia is cited as a helpful approach with a recently prepared study identified to review ways in which this is being used or potential results of this approach. One thing that is cited

as helpful in this process is the fact that parent(s) are handed the driver's license, who in turn provides it to their son/daughter when they determine that it is appropriate.

MADD and SADD were cited frequently for their active role in addressing drinking and driving issues among young drivers. AAA also was mentioned for its efforts in preparing a guide for parents that helps with questions regarding teaching your teens to drive. It includes an interactive, high-tech video/CD/DVD (License to Learn). As they indicated, AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has information that deals with risk-taking and is on the cutting edge of changing driver safety.

National interviewees cited the efforts of police officers in the school setting as a helpful approach. Another cited strategy is the use and lose approach that is implemented in some states where youth who use alcohol while under the age of 18 can be subject to losing their driver's license. Individuals who are convicted of using alcohol while under a specified age (i.e., 18 years) can be subjected to losing their driver's license until that same age.

Fairly typically through the interviews, the attention to drinking and driving suggests that progress has been made towards impressing young drivers about the importance of and dangers associated with consuming alcohol and driving. It appears that prior efforts to address this have been helpful in making a difference.

Also, the attention to driver training behind the wheel and practice with this is an approach that is encouraged; through this emphasis, young people can gain greater practical experience in their early days of driving an automobile.

Several judges highlighted the efforts of local organizations like the Kiwanis Club, MADD and SADD who have developed programs with local schools, police departments and courts to provide driver safety education on a variety of subject areas to young drivers. In addition, resource officers and the judge go to schools and talk in driver's education classes.

Police officers highlighted their role at schools; they conduct high school visits as well as hand out informative literature aimed at educating and preparing young drivers. The most practiced effort is awareness groups conducted by police officers at schools. Checkpoints are also other methods that police officers use to reinforce policies, laws and regulations.

Guidance counselors, referrals to counseling, and affiliation with groups like SADD and MADD are efforts used to heighten young driver awareness. DUI checkpoints and guest speakers were also noted as other efforts being made to increase young drivers' awareness. Virginia DMV participants mentioned awareness programs and police officer programs are the two most common positive efforts. They also indicated that classroom instruction and counseling are the two most commonly performed outreach strategies.

*Virginia is currently examining its curriculum to identify ways of enhancing its content and approaches. It also maintains its driver licensing handbook on its extensive web site. DMV promotes a large emphasis on safety with a dedicated portion of its web site, including a specific focus on young drivers.*