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Education and Preparation Over Driver Age: The More Pressing Debate

“In 1909, Pennsylvania was the first state to put an age restriction on driver’s licenses. It was an absolute minimum of 18 years of age” (Gruffydd). Currently, the age minimum for individuals to obtain a driving permit throughout the United States varies from fourteen to sixteen years old. As of 1919 (“50 Years”), the age requirement in Pennsylvania has been lowered to sixteen. Currently, there is a large dispute as to whether or not this driving age should be lowered. One side sees the benefits of younger individuals being on the road sooner, the other side sees the potential dangers younger drivers could cause. Both sides have valid points, yet fail to see the larger picture. Even though age plays a significant role in driver safety, the real issue with new drivers is the lack of thorough education and suitable instruction throughout the transition from the learner’s permit stage into full licensure.

The Debate on the Bill

Pennsylvania’s legislature recently began to debate lowering the driving age from sixteen to fifteen years of age. The driving age debate in Pennsylvania was sparked by two senators who felt a change was needed. Representatives Stephan Kinsey and Eric Nelson proposed the bill currently being debated (Stockburger). On February 16th, 2023, the two representatives announced that they would sponsor the new bill in the hopes that it would be legalized (“PA Legislature”). Kinsey and Nelson believe that having the age set at 16 is too restricting and that lowering it would allow teens to “plug into the workforce sooner.” Representative Nelson stated, “Government should not be a roadblock for young people pursuing their opportunity” (Stockburger). Teens all over Pennsylvania would benefit if they were allowed to start driving

sooner and were able to participate in employment options and other activities. However, whether or not the benefits are greater than the dangers this new bill would pose is still to be decided.

Like representatives Kinsey and Nelson, many people throughout Pennsylvania believe the benefits of the bill outweigh the dangers. Kinsey and Nelson stated in a memo about their proposed bill that “If PA teens wish to work and are legally permitted to do so, they should not be denied the right to travel to their place of employment” (Schweigert). Since young teens cannot drive themselves, many look to their parents to take them to work. If the driving age is lowered, teens could drive themselves to their numerous activities, relieving parents of the need to constantly chauffeur them around (Miller). Many parents have jobs of their own and work schedules that prohibit them from taking their kids to work and picking them up afterward several days a week. Additionally, 45% of Americans have no access to some form of public transit. The AllTransit Performance Score is a scoring system created by The Center for Neighborhood Technology (CNT) to help identify how convenient it is for commuters to travel to their places of work using public transportation (“FAQ”). For 48 of the 50 states, the AllTransit Performance Scores are not even 5.0 out of 10 (“Driving Age”). If teenagers cannot drive themselves, their parents cannot drive them, and they have no means of public transit, young teens find themselves with no way to get to work and, as a result, can not seek employment until they are older. This new bill would allow young teens to work much sooner by allowing them to drive sooner.

On the other hand, a vast majority of individuals believe the dangers for young drivers are too great and that lowering the age would only produce harmful outcomes. ABC News interviewed several driving teenagers at East Stroudsburg High School South in PA, and the teens confirmed that they would not have felt as at ease or as ready if they had started driving at fifteen (Eustice). Furthermore, a study done by Insurance Zebra in 2023 found that 40% of teens

in the United States feel scared about driving motor vehicles (Meyer). Even if the age is lowered, if teens are frightened to drive, lowering the driving age would only put the keys into more unsteady hands. Robert Miller, leading writer for Ablison, an environmental awareness website, stated that “Lowering the driving age might expose individuals to the responsibility of driving before they have fully developed their decision-making abilities, leading to poor judgment on the road and increased risks” (Miller). Moreover, he explains that “younger individuals may be more inclined to engage in risky behaviors to impress or appease their friends, leading to compromised safety on the road” (Miller). More reckless drivers on the road would not be beneficial for anyone and would simply result in more fatal crashes, not only for the new drivers but those they may collide with.

The debate over lowering the Pennsylvania driving age fails to fully appreciate the thousands of teens who, with the driving age set at 16, are currently experiencing injuries, crashes, and deaths. Even with safety measures in place in every state in America, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found that about “2,800 teens in the U.S. ages 13-19 were killed and about 227,000 were injured in motor vehicle crashes in 2020. That means that every day about 8 teens died due to motor vehicle crashes, and hundreds more were injured” (“Teen Drivers”). Of those 229,800 (approximately) teen drivers involved in crashes in 2020, 13,727 were PA drivers ages sixteen to nineteen (“Crash Facts”). The facts seem to show that Pennsylvania’s current driving requirements do not include enough quality training time for young drivers of any age.

Current Driving Requirements

The current training requirements attempt to provide boundaries and expectations for young drivers. In order to obtain a license, students in Pennsylvania must go through a three-stage Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) program. In the first stage, the Learner’s Permit, an individual must meet and fulfill certain requirements. GDL programs currently require a

minimum age of 16 to get a Learner's Permit, which they will have for at least six months ("Graduated Driver"). In order to get a Learner's Permit, new drivers must pass an intellectual examination on the driving rules and regulations ("Young Driver"). During the Learner's Permit stage, a new driver must be accompanied at all times by a licensed driver who is 21 years or older ("Young Driver"). Additionally, The restrictions during this stage include no nighttime driving between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m. and a limit of one underage passenger ("Graduated Driver"). During the six-month "skill building" process, a new driver must complete "at least 65 hours of practical, adult-supervised driving experience," including "10 hours of night driving and 5 hours of driving in poor weather conditions" ("Young Driver"). Once all of these requirements are met, a new driver will have finished the first stage of the GDL program and will be able to move into the second stage.

After the Learner's Permit stage, a young driver transitions into the Junior Driver's License stage. To move on to this second stage, a new driver must take a road test and confirm that they completed 65 hours of supervised driving during the first stage ("Young Driver"). After passing the test, the driver receives a temporary license that signifies they are in the Junior Driver's stage. In the second stage, the requirements for young drivers are reduced. Young drivers are still prohibited from driving between 11:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. except for documented volunteer work ("Young Driver"). Once young drivers have their Junior License for six months, the limit of young passengers allowed in the vehicle changes from one to three unrelated underage passengers without a parent or legal guardian present ("Young Driver"). From this point, they move on to the 3rd and final stage in the GDL process.

In the last stage of the GDL system, a young driver earns full licensure. When a young driver turns 18, they become eligible to gain full licensure and a real license. Young drivers cannot receive a full license until they are 18 years old "unless he or she has maintained a crash-and-convention-free record for 12 months and completed an approved driver's education

course” (“Young Driver”). After obtaining a full license, the driver is no longer required to follow any restrictions further than the common road rules such as turning on their blinker, stopping at a stop sign, and driving the speed limit. Restrictions on nighttime driving no longer apply to fully-licensed drivers, and, as long as the number of people is under or equal to the number of seatbelts, the number of unrelated passengers in the car is not limited (“Young Driver”). Young drivers are now able to join the road like other fully licensed drivers without the worries of passing tests or transitioning to different requirements. At this point, a new driver has gone through all three stages, completed the GDL program, and has become a full-fledged driver. Although all the GDL regulations and precautions seem stringent, the current measures to keep new drivers safe while driving are simply not stringent enough.

The Real Problem

The real debate Pennsylvania legislators should be having is about the quality and quantity of training required for teen drivers to get a license because, regardless of age, teens are simply not being prepared well enough to drive smartly in order to drive safely. The evidence surrounding teen drivers speaks clearly to this problem. In 2021 alone, 2,608 people were killed in a motor vehicle accident where the teen driver was between the ages of 15 and 18 (Teen Driving). The National Research Council, Institute of Medicine, and Transportation Research Board Program Committee stated that “Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of mortality and serious morbidity for all young people ages 4 through 34, and the rates are the highest during the driver’s first few months of driving on their own” (National Research, “2”). The committee continued by adding that “even after more than 6 months licensed to drive alone, teens are 2 to 3 times more likely to be in a fatal crash than are the most experienced drivers,” (National Research, “2”). Furthermore, a study done in New Zealand looked at the commonalities for young drivers throughout the licensing period. They found there was an “increase in crash rates for those who transitioned from an intermediate to full license between 12 and 18 months but not

for those who transitioned after 18 months (Lewis-Evans, 2010)” (Curry). Additionally, a study of young drivers done in New Jersey concluded that, regardless of age, young drivers transitioning from the junior driving period into full licensure experienced more crashes than those of the same age who were still driving on a junior license (Curry). In places like Canada and New Zealand, where people wait until they are older to start driving, research shows that crash rates are higher for drivers who are older but have just begun to drive than those their age who have more experience (National Research, “2”). It is evident from the data given that poor training and preparation is a severe issue that needs to be dealt with in order to assure the safety of all drivers.

Furthermore, due to their lack of proper safety education, young drivers are making irresponsible choices that result in car accidents. For instance, a study done by the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia showed that “the most common types of crashes involve left turns, rear-end events, and running off the road” (Walshe). These can result from poor decisions that young drivers, without thorough preparation, do not have the common sense to responsibly prevent. There are many common mistakes that can occur. An article by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), stated that “in 2021, drowsy driving claimed 684 lives, and some studies even suggest drowsiness may have been involved in more than 10-20 percent of fatal or injury crashes” (Teen Driving). Driving while sleep-deprived is a severe issue, and although teen drivers are not allowed to drive late at night while still under their junior license, once that restriction is removed, they inherit a serious risk that could cost them their lives. After 17 hours awake (for example a teen who woke up at 6:30 a.m. and is still socializing at 11.30 p.m.), a teen’s performance is impaired to the same extent that it would be with a blood alcohol content of 0.05 percent”(National Research, “3”). Many teen drivers have even been caught driving with alcohol in their system. Not only is this illegal, but teenagers react and respond to alcohol use differently than older adults. They also are not as sensitive to the indicators

suggesting they might be impaired (National Research, “2”). Under the influence of alcohol, teens may become even more reckless. In crashes that involve drivers or passengers who have been consuming alcohol, it is more likely that they were not wearing a seat belt at the time of the accident (National Research, “2”). Many of the teens riding or driving in motor vehicles have admitted they do not consistently wear a seatbelt (43%), have ridden with a driver who had consumed alcohol (17%), and have been using their phones while driving (39%) (Meyer). The results of these common errors could be fatal for drivers, passengers, and even those in the surrounding area. Without proper safety education, young drivers are likely to suffer the consequences of their reckless behaviors.

Many young drivers are not fully mature enough to handle complex driving situations. In *Preventing Teen Motor Crashes* the author states that “a complex web of physiological, psychological, and environmental conditions contributes to an increase in impulsivity in adolescents and influences both decision-making and regulatory functions that affect driving as well as other adolescent behaviors” (National Research, “3”). Earlier in the book the author explained that “one analysis of police reports of almost 2,000 crashes in which newly licensed drivers were involved pointed to inexperience as the major contributor” (National Research, “3”). If teens are not taught well enough to avoid difficult situations on the road, they are left unprepared for changes both inside and outside the car. Research done by the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia showed that 75 percent of teen drivers crash due to a lack of scanning the area, going too fast, and being distracted (Walshe). Especially for teens, driving as a group is exceedingly dangerous. Balancing one’s concentration on peers and their interactions and discussions throughout the car ride along with traffic, road rules, and operating the vehicle is immensely difficult, even more so depending on how large of a group (National Research, “3”). For young teen drivers, having teen passengers in the car almost doubles the risk of a car crash, from 2.28% to 4.72% (National Research, “2”). When with peers, young drivers may be more

susceptible to risky driving. However, even by themselves, teen drivers can be reckless. Most teens, after a certain amount of time coming home unharmed from an ordinary drive, can become overconfident in their skills to avoid hazardous outcomes. They begin to see driving safely as something they are capable of doing without much thought, and, as a result, are more prone to take risks (National Research, “3”). A lack of experience keeps teens from being able to foresee all the possible dangerous scenarios they could encounter. Thus, with no proper training course required, young drivers do not get the experience needed in order to safely navigate driving roads.

Lowering the age limit for licensing in Pennsylvania while there are already safety issues with the program is unwise. In *Preventing Teen Motor Crashes* by National Academies Press, the author states, “The capacity for planning, logical reasoning, and understanding the long-term consequences of behavior are far from fully developed during the period when most young people in America are beginning to drive” (National Research “3”). As a fifteen-year-old living in Pennsylvania, I find it unsettling that legislators might lower the current driving age requirement. As much as it would benefit me, I am not confident that the methods to prepare me would be enough to ensure my safety, not only from crashing into things myself but from other teens who all of a sudden are allowed to drive, regardless of how well they are prepared. In an informal poll conducted among peers on how comfortable teens feel without a driver’s education course versus having to take one, twelve out of fifteen teenagers, ages fifteen through seventeen, stated that they would feel more unsafe and scared to drive if a driver’s ed course was not mandatory for new drivers in their state. Comments shared in the poll showed that teens who supported a driver’s education course felt they would be more prepared as new drivers. The teens expressed that they would feel more comfortable knowing they would receive correct instruction on the current rules, along with guided practice dealing with on-the-road problems. Several teens also felt the written test alone was not challenging enough to ensure that new drivers would

know how to properly handle real-life situations. Those who did not see the necessity of driver's ed seemed to be more concerned about how much money, time, and effort it would take to complete the course. Clearly, proper education, not age, is the most important requirement when it comes to securing the safety and driving knowledge of new drivers.

Conclusion

Since research suggests the current training and restrictions are not enough, more thorough education and requirements are necessary to ensure that teens are safe once they are allowed to start driving. Even if the bill to lower the driving age does not become a law, it would benefit Pennsylvanians to reconsider the current requirements to obtain a Learner's Permit. A drivers' educational safety course should be required where teens are shown many possible dangers, variables, and choices they could encounter and be expected to navigate while on the road. If the bill to lower the driving age is passed, then a few more mandates should be taken into consideration. Since the bill would add another year to the process, the 65-hour on-the-road driving practice should increase to 80 hours, including 20 hours of driving during nighttime, and 10 hours of driving in inclement weather. In addition, the written test to obtain the Learner's Permit and the road test for the Junior Driver's License should be more thorough and challenging to cover a wider range of scenarios. New drivers should also have to wait a minimum of twelve months instead of six after getting their Learner's Permit before they can obtain their Junior Driver's License since they are able to attain a permit much earlier. An additional twelve-month waiting period should take place between the Junior Driver's stage and the full licensure stage even if, during that period, the driver turns eighteen. This allotted time will ensure that the driver gets adequate training before they have a full unrestricted license since most accidents occur when an individual first gains their full license. After being legally permitted full licensure, a driver should be required to take a 3-to-4-hour refresher safety course before being allowed to receive their full Driver's license. These proposals would ensure that the Graduated Driver

Licensing program would enable new drivers to learn how to drive safely and be prepared for all the potentially dangerous circumstances they may encounter.

The current debate over the regulations to get a learner's permit, although it may be a logical debate, fails to see the flaws in the current foundational requirements that are not adequately keeping young drivers safe. Without proper education and training, teens are too inexperienced to foresee possible hazardous situations that are not uncommon while out on the road. Regardless of whether or not the newly proposed bill to lower the PA driving age passes, a more thorough preparation program to ensure the safety of drivers is needed. For it is not the age of an individual that matters but the experience they have.

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