

Putting Limits on Teen Drivers

States are getting tough on teens behind the wheel. But many parents are reluctant to curb their children

By WENDY COLE HENDERSON

SINCE KINDERGARTEN, THEY HAD BEEN known as “the crew.” Still a close-knit group in high school, the five Henderson, Nevada, boys were all delighted when Sean Larimer turned 16 and in 2003 became the first to get his driver’s license. Sean’s mom, Susan Larimer, a hospital nurse who was in the midst of a divorce, was happy about it too. “I thought I needed him to drive,” she recalls. So Susan gave her son permission to drive around with the crew one evening just 63 days after he passed his road test.

As was customary during his outings with friends, Susan and Sean checked in with each other by cell phone several times. But while awaiting his return, Susan dozed off. Just after 1 a.m., the phone startled her awake with the news every parent of a teen dreads. Her son had smashed her Pontiac Grand Am and was in the hospital’s trauma unit. Three of the boys in the car had been killed, the fourth injured. Sean, who had been drinking heavily at a party that night (reportedly as much as eight beers in an hour), served two years in juvenile lockup for driving under the influence of alcohol and reckless driving. He cannot get his license back until he turns 21. Susan, shaken by the tragedy and determined to spare other young drivers and their parents similar agony, has lobbied state lawmakers to make

the licensing process for teen drivers lengthier and more safety conscious. “I’m not making excuses for his choice to drink,” she says. “But if we had tougher laws”—like prohibiting newly licensed teens from transporting other minors—“Sean would not have been out driving with his friends that night.” In October 2005, Nevada put in place a graduated licensing law, which phases in driving privileges as teens gain experience and maturity.

Getting a driver’s license remains a major milestone for teens in their impatient journey toward adulthood—and for their parents, eager to liberate themselves from constant chauffeuring duties. But car crashes are the main cause of death for U.S. teenagers, killing about 6,000 drivers between the ages of 16 and 19 each year. That’s more fatalities for this age group than those caused by guns and drug overdoses combined. And the younger and less experienced the driver, the worse the danger. Drivers ages 16 to 19 have a fatality rate four times

as high as that of drivers 25 to 29.

Experts say that parents who assume that simply reminding their kids to buckle up and watch the speed limit miss the central problem: the adolescent brain may be unable to handle the responsibilities of driving. Researchers with the National Institute of Mental Health have shown that the parts of the brain that weigh risks, make judgments and control impulsive

TAKING A TOLL

- **The No. 1 killer** of U.S. teenagers is car crashes.
- **About 6,000 teen drivers** are killed in auto accidents each year—more fatalities for this age group than those caused by guns and drug overdoses combined.
- **Drivers aged 16 to 19** have a fatality rate four times as high as that of drivers 25 to 29.
- **18% fewer collisions** involving teen drivers occurred in Las Vegas in the first eight months of 2006 in the year after teen-driving restrictions were imposed.

behavior are still developing through the teen years and don't mature until about age 25.

Those findings—and aggressive lobbying by auto-safety advocates—have helped push 45 states to adopt some form of graduated driver licensing, or GDL, which lengthens the waiting period before teens can obtain a full “go anywhere, anytime” driver's license. Slowing down the process has slowed down the accident rate. Per-capita crashes have fallen 23% among 16-year-old drivers in California since its strict GDL law was enacted in 1998, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) reported in August. The state's late-night crashes were down 27%, and crashes with teen passengers were down 38%. Similar drops have occurred in other states. Despite those impressive results, however, legislators have balked at imposing additional measures that could make teen drivers even safer.

Studies suggest that nighttime driving is particularly dangerous for teens, and curfews are urged. “Most accidents involving teens occur before midnight,” says Susan Ferguson, senior vice president of research for the IIHS. “So the smartest laws go into effect earlier.” Last year nine states introduced measures to rein in teens' nighttime driving privileges, but only one—Nevada—passed such a law.

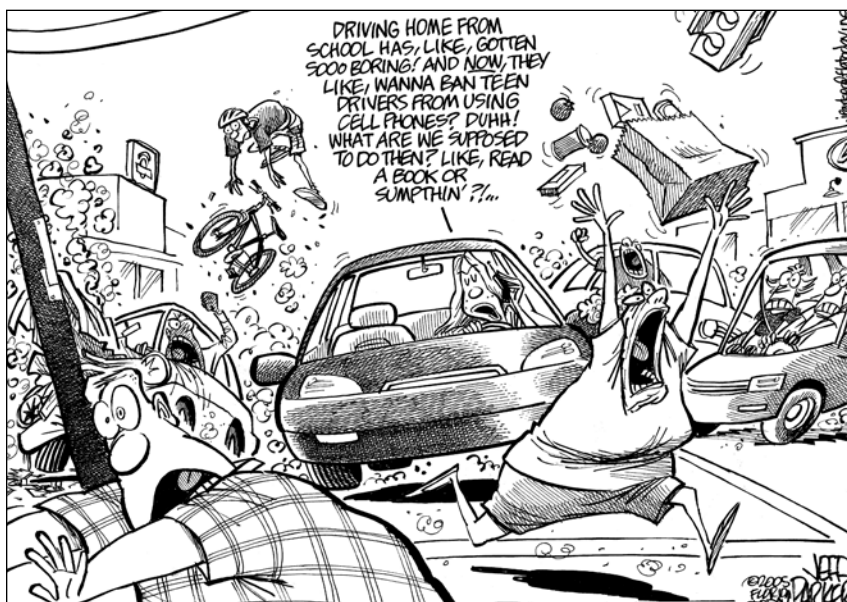
Nevada is one of the last states to join the decade-long movement to restrict teen drivers, but its law is now among the most comprehensive in the nation. It requires teen drivers to be off the road by 10 p.m., earlier than the midnight or 1 a.m. curfews

in other states (six states still have no nighttime limits at all). Nevada also set a six-month waiting period between permit and licensing, mandates at least 50 hours of parent-supervised driving experience that must be tracked in a written log, and forbids newly licensed drivers to transport other youths for three months. The changes are already producing positive results. In Las Vegas, collisions involving teen drivers were down 18%, to 1,155, for the first eight months of 2006 compared with the same period in 2005.

Some parents, like Donna Botti, are not convinced that the restrictions should apply to their children. On a recent Saturday evening as her daughter Angela, 16, was getting ready for a friend's sweet-16 party at a downtown Vegas club, she belatedly noticed the phrase “Parent Drop-off and Pickup Preferred” on her invitation. “How stupid is that? I have my own car,” Angela scoffed. Although the festivities were supposed to end at 10 p.m., Angela had no intention of racing home in her shiny '05 Hyundai Tucson to make curfew. In fact, she and her parents said they were unaware that nighttime restrictions for teens existed until being interviewed for this story. Donna's sunny expression momentarily turned pained when she was asked whether she would allow Angela, who was chauffeuring two pals that evening, to ignore the law: “I don't want to feel like an uncaring mother, but truthfully, I'm not worried about her.”

That kind of statement makes Susan Larimer

cringe. “People would like to believe Sean's crash was an isolated incident,” she says. “But the second your kid drives away under his or her own power, you have no idea what can happen. If this nightmare can happen to our family, it can happen to anyone.” ■



Questions

1. Why might teen drivers have trouble assessing risks?
2. Has Graduated Driving Licensing (GDL) legislation been effective in California?
3. Do you support GDL? Explain.