TEEN DRIVER CRASHES

A Report to Congress
July 2008

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16. Abstract

This report summarizes what is known about the teen driver crash problem and reviews the research on the major contributing factors to the high teen crash rate. Dispositional factors, such as immaturity, inexperience, faulty judgment, and a higher propensity for risk-taking all contribute to the teen driver crash problem. Additionally, younger drivers are not experienced in hazard recognition. They do not generally acknowledge inherently dangerous situations on the road, and therefore do not react appropriately. A brief review is included on a variety of programs designed to decrease teen driver crashes, such as educational programs, laws and sanctions, and licensing programs. Scientific evaluations of these programs are discussed in terms of reducing the teen driver crash problem, thereby making America's roads safer for our youth.

The study and report conclude with recommendations based on research for developing and implementing interventions for this important traffic safety issue. Strong evidence supports the strengthening of graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws in the States and incorporating driver education into the GDL system.

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TEEN DRIVER CRASHES

The House Report (109-12 Section 2012) accompanying H.R. 3, *Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users*, requested the Secretary to conduct a Teen Driver Study on the major causes of traffic crashes involving teen drivers and evaluate existing teen driver programs. It went on to request that the Secretary "transmit a report to the Committee on the results of the study and recommendations to reduce the number of traffic crashes involving teenagers, including recommendations for model driving school curriculum and graduated licensing requirements." This report documents the study's findings and recommendations.

Teen Driver Crashes

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for 15- to 20-year-olds. In 2006, 3,490 15- to 20-year-old drivers died and an additional 272,000 were injured in motor vehicle crashes. In 2006, 12.9 percent of all the drivers involved in fatal crashes were between 15 and 20 years old. In comparison, these young drivers represent 6.3 percent of all licensed drivers. Overall, driver fatalities for this age group increased by 3 percent between 1996 and 2006. For young males, driver fatalities rose by 5 percent, compared with a 3 percent decrease for young females (NHTSA Traffic Safety Facts – Young Drivers, DOT HS 810 817, 2006).

Figure 1 shows that in 2006 young drivers between 15 and 20 years old had the highest fatal crash involvement rate of any age group with 59.5 fatal crashes per 100,000 licensed drivers. This rate is significantly higher than any other age group and more than double the rate for any age group 35 and older.

Figure 1
Drivers Involved in Fatal Crashes per 100,000 Licensed Drivers

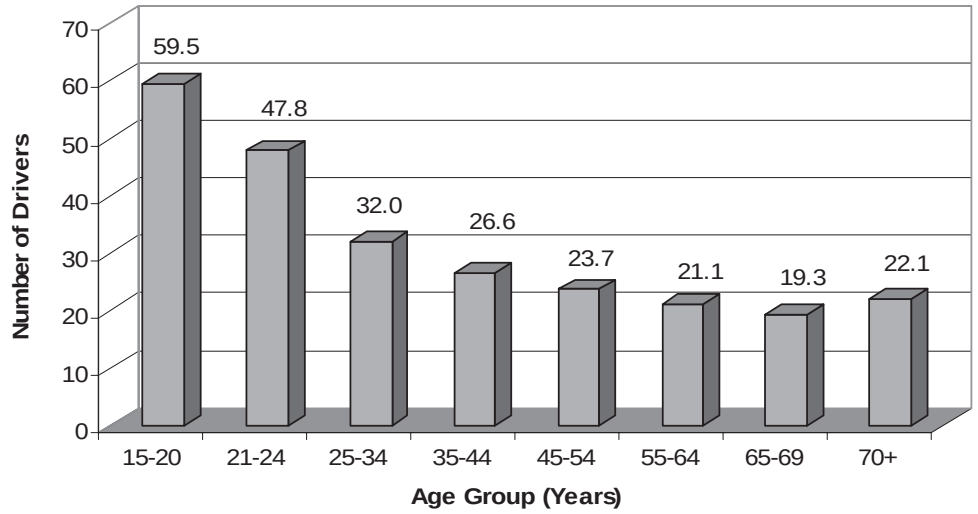
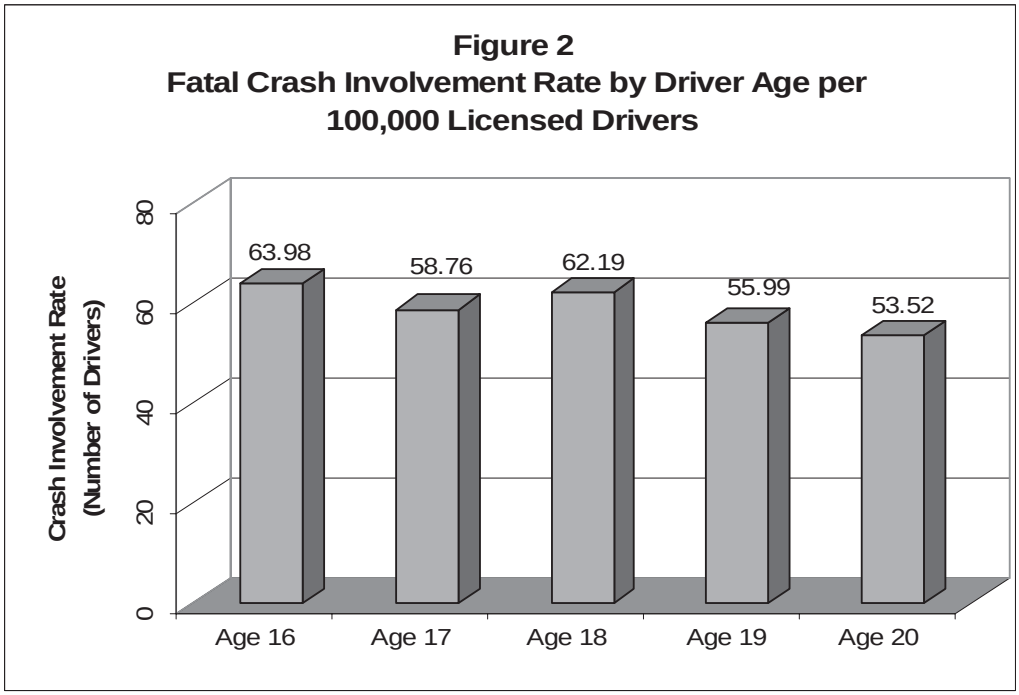


Figure 2 shows that in 2005 the involvement rate per 100,000 licensed drivers was highest (63.98) for 16-year-old drivers and lowest for 20-year-old drivers (53.52). Rates for 17- and 18-year-old drivers are close to each other but are lower than the rate for 16-year-olds.



Contributing Factors to Teen Driver Crash Rates

Highway safety literature has documented that teen drivers, due to a combination of immaturity and inexperience, have a higher propensity for risk-taking behaviors than do older and more experienced drivers. Research and crash data tell us that teen drivers are less likely to buckle up, and more likely to speed or drive too fast for prevailing conditions (Hedlund, Shults, & Compton, 2003). Other factors shown to place teen novice drivers at greater risk of crash involvement include driving late at night (Lin & Fearn, 2003), driving while impaired by alcohol (Williams, 2003), and driving in the presence of teenage passengers (Lin & Fearn, 2003; Williams, 2003). In fact, in-depth studies of novice-driver crashes suggest that contributing factors to teen crashes are much the same as for adult experienced driver crashes.

Teenagers appear to use new technology at a greater rate than older people do. The latest survey of driver cell phone use found younger drivers ages 16-24 using hand-held cell phones at a higher rate than older drivers (Traffic Safety Facts – Driver Cell Phone Use in 2006 – Overall Results, DOT HS 810 790, 2007). While younger drivers may not be more likely to use their Personal Digital Assistants (PDAs), iPods, and other portable entertainment devices while driving than older drivers, younger drivers are less experienced at multitasking while driving and are therefore more easily distracted than their older counterparts (Stutts et al., 2001). In fact, preliminary research has identified different visual scanning patterns between younger novice drivers and older, more experienced drivers, providing support for teen drivers' apparent inability to detect high-risk situations (Pradhan et al., 2005).

Younger drivers are frequently inexperienced in hazard recognition and often take unnecessary risks due to a combination of poor decision making and an illusion of invulnerability (Williams, 2006). Younger drivers do not always consider the consequences of their actions. Recent research in adolescent development supports the contention that younger people are often developmentally less capable of making sound judgments and decisions regarding potentially risky behavior. Areas of the brain involved in rendering judgments and making decisions are not fully developed until around age 25 (Keating, 2007).

Young drivers are particularly vulnerable to certain high-risk driving situations, such as driving at night (Lin & Fearn, 2003; Williams, 2003), after drinking alcohol (Williams, 2003), with other teenage passengers (Lin & Fearn, 2003; Williams, 2003), and when unbelted (Ferguson, 2003).

Programs to Reduce Teen Driver Crashes

A variety of approaches have been taken to reduce teen driver crashes. These include laws and sanctions, licensing programs, and educational programs. These will be discussed briefly in turn.

Laws and Sanctions – A number of laws that restrict teenage drinking and driving have been shown to reduce teen crashes. Studies about raising the drinking age to 21 years old and enacting zero tolerance laws have been shown to reduce teen crash rates. Zero-tolerance laws make it unlawful for drivers under age 21 to operate vehicles with any detectable amount of alcohol in their systems. All 50 States and the District of Columbia now have 21-year-old minimum drinking age and zero-tolerance laws. NHTSA estimates that these laws have reduced traffic fatalities involving drivers 18 to 20 years old by 13 percent and have saved an estimated 25,509 lives since 1975. In 2006, minimum drinking age laws (NHTSA, 2006) saved an estimated 890 lives.

In addition, States with primary seat belt laws (where a motorist can be stopped and ticketed for not using a seat belt) have a 14-percentage-point higher use rate than States with weaker enforcement laws. This difference in use rate extends to teen drivers and passengers. Thus, the adoption of primary seat belt laws by all States would save many teen driver and passenger lives (NHTSA, 2007).

Graduated Driver Licensing – Given the inexperience of novice drivers and evidence that with experience novice driver crash rates decline fairly dramatically, people have sought ways to provide novice drivers an opportunity to gain driving experience under less risky circumstances. This approach is known as graduated driver licensing (GDL), and has been shown by numerous studies to be a highly effective method of reducing novice driver crash rates. NHTSA recommends a GDL program that involves a three-stage licensing system for beginning drivers (stage 1 = learner's permit; stage 2 = provisional license; and stage 3 = full license) that slowly introduces the young, novice driver to the driving task by controlling exposure to high-risk driving situations (e.g., nighttime driving, driving with passengers, and driving after drinking any amount of alcohol).

The three stages of the GDL system include specific components and restrictions to introduce driving privileges gradually to beginning drivers. Novice drivers are required to demonstrate responsible driving behavior during each stage of licensing before advancing to the next level.

Each stage includes recommended components and restrictions for States to consider when implementing a GDL system. NHTSA currently recommends the following components and restrictions for each stage:

Stage 1: Learner's Permit

- State sets minimum age for a learner's permit at no younger than 16 years old;
- Pass vision and knowledge tests, including rules of the road, signs, and signals;
- Completion of basic driver training;
- Licensed adult (who is at least 21 years old) required in the vehicle at all times;
- All occupants must wear seat belts;
- Teenage passenger restrictions– not more than one teenage passenger for the first 12 months of Intermediate License. Afterward, limit the number of teenage passengers to two until age 18;
- Zero alcohol while driving;
- Learners permit is visually distinctive from other driver licenses;
- Must remain crash- and conviction-free, including violations of the seat belt, zero-tolerance, speed, and other GDL provisions, for at least 6 consecutive months to advance to the next level;
- Parental certification of 30 to 50 practice hours; and
- No use of portable electronic communication and entertainment devices while driving.

Stage 2: Intermediate (Provisional) License

- Completion of Stage 1;
- State sets minimum age of 16.5 years old;
- Completion of intermediate driver education training (e.g., safe driving decision-making, risk education, etc.);
- All occupants must wear seat belts;
- Licensed adult required in the vehicle from 10 p.m. until 5 a.m. (e.g., night-time driving restriction) with limited exceptions (i.e., religious-, school-, medical-, or employment-related driving);
- Zero alcohol while driving;
- Driver improvement actions are initiated at lower point level than for regular drivers;
- Provisional license is visually distinctive from a regular license;
- Teenage passenger restrictions – not more than one teenage passenger for the first 12 months of Intermediate License. Afterward, limit the number of teenage passengers to two until age 18;
- Must remain crash- and conviction-free, including violations of the seat belt, zero-tolerance, speed, and other GDL provisions, for at least 6 consecutive months to advance to the next level; and
- No use of portable electronic communication and entertainment devices while driving.

Stage 3: Full Licensure

- Completion of Stage 2;
- State sets minimum age of 18 for lifting of passenger and nighttime restrictions;
- Zero alcohol while driving; and
- Visually distinctive license for drivers under the age of 21.

Evaluations clearly show the benefits of adopting GDL laws and GDL components. Florida's GDL law resulted in a 9-percent reduction in crashes for drivers who were 16 and 17 years old (Ulmer et al., 2000).

Ongoing research in Michigan (Shope et al., 2001) and North Carolina (Foss et al., 2001) has shown a 26-percent and 25-percent reduction, respectively, in crashes involving 16-year-old drivers. Maryland (Freidlander et al., under review), Texas (Willis, 2006), and Pennsylvania (Coben & McKay, 2003) GDL programs have shown similar success.

Nova Scotia, Canada, reported a 29-percent reduction in crashes involving 16-year-old drivers (Mayhew et al., 2003), while a preliminary report from Ontario, Canada, cites a 31-percent reduction in crashes for all drivers 15 to 19 years old (Mayhew et al., 2002).

Recently, NHTSA completed an evaluation of Georgia's GDL (Teen and Adult Driver Responsibility Act, TADRA), and more recently of Oregon's modified GDL program. Both evaluations show unequivocal success in decreasing the teen crash rates in those jurisdictions. NHTSA also recently completed a study that compared States with passenger restriction laws for novice teen drivers to States that do not have such passenger restrictions. The specific selected States include California, Massachusetts, and Virginia, and the results showed reduced teen crash rates in the targeted States due, at least in part, to the enactment of the passenger restriction laws.

A NHTSA-supported study by Johns Hopkins University, released in June 2006, found that States that have comprehensive GDL programs had a 20-percent reduction in fatal crashes involving 16-year-old drivers. A comprehensive GDL program included at least five of the following components:

- A minimum age of 15½ for obtaining a learner permit;
- A waiting period after obtaining a learner permit of at least 3 months before applying for an intermediate license;
- A minimum of 30 hours of supervised driving;
- Minimum age of at least 16 for obtaining an intermediate state license;
- Minimum age of at least 17 years for full licensing;
- A nighttime driving restriction; and
- A restriction on carrying passengers.

As of September 2007, 46 States and the District of Columbia have enacted a 3-stage graduated licensing system for young novice drivers.[1] Arkansas, Kansas, Minnesota and North Dakota do not yet have a 3-stage GDL program in place. NHTSA will continue to evaluate GDL on a State-by-State basis, and will assess the relative contribution of specific components within GDL (e.g., passenger restrictions, supervised driving).

[1] As of June 2008, Minnesota has joined the States that have enacted a 3-stage GDL, totaling 47 States plus the District of Columbia with a 3-stage GDL.

Driver Education – It was once thought that effective driver education and training would reduce high crash rates of young, novice drivers. Historically, driver education in the United States has taught basic driving skills and safe driving practices. Many carefully conducted studies of driver education in the United States and abroad have failed to provide evidence for decreased crash rates among teen drivers who have participated in driver education programs (e.g., Jones, 1993; Mayhew & Simpson, 1996; Vernick et. al., 1999; Williams & Ferguson, 2004; Wynne-Jones & Hurst, 1985). Driver education remains a standard for acquiring driving skills and 24 States require the completion of a driver education program before a person under the age of 18 can apply for a license (IIHS, 2007).

Traditional prelicensing driver education for novice drivers typically entails 30 hours of classroom instruction (theory, rules of the road, safe/defensive driving techniques, risk assessment), and 6 to 10 hours of in-vehicle training (vehicle control). While this may prove adequate for teaching basic vehicle control, it does not appear to result in long-term reduction in crash rates for novice drivers. Teens do not get into crashes because they are uninformed about the basic rules of the road or safe driving practices; rather, studies show they are involved in crashes as a result of inexperience and risk-taking. Given this history of mixed results on the ability of driver education to positively affect crash performance, it is unlikely that an educational program alone, no matter how well designed and implemented, would result in dramatic reductions in teen crash rates.

In 2000, under a cooperative agreement, NHTSA contracted with the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association (ADTSEA) to produce driver education program standards on curricula, delivery, and outcomes. These standards were developed based on the best thinking of 35 driver education experts assembled to consider what and how driver education should be taught. Based on these standards, ADTSEA also developed a detailed driver education curriculum. Seven States have adopted the ADTSEA standards, four States have adopted the ADTSEA curriculum, and a many individual programs in other States have adopted or use parts of the ADTSEA curriculum (ADTSEA, 2007).

In 2005, ADTSEA updated the standards and its accompanying curriculum, under a NHTSA cooperative agreement, to ensure the content kept pace with automotive technical advances. ADTSEA provides technical assistance to States and jurisdictions planning to implement or expand driver education programs and graduated driver licensing requirements. (See the Appendix for details.)

NHTSA is in the process of reviewing the current state of driver education in the United States. The U.S. Department of Education has joined with NHTSA in a review of current knowledge and state-of-the-art instructional tools, training methods, and curricula consistent with identified best teaching methodologies for teenagers. One component of this project will convene an expert panel to determine the optimal sequencing and timing of the components of driver education training (classroom, in-vehicle, supervised driving). Given the lack of definitive research and evaluation on many of these issues, it is possible the panel will not be able to clearly identify one “best” approach. In this case, NHTSA will assess the feasibility of moving forward with research to test alternative approaches to driver education to see if one approach produces safer novice drivers.

NHTSA also is exploring the development of consensus national guidelines for driver education program content, delivery, and quality control. As part of the process to develop these guidelines driver education administrators and specialists from every State will be invited to a national conference in late 2008. The development of these guidelines will help to ensure that quality driver education is delivered and monitored uniformly throughout the country.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The available evidence shows that:

- Twenty-one-year-old minimum drinking age laws and zero-tolerance laws have been effective in reducing teen alcohol-related crashes.
- GDL programs have been shown to reduce teen crashes by approximately 20 percent.
- Primary seat belt laws lead to higher seat belt use among drivers and passengers of all ages.
- Driver education is effective at ensuring that novice drivers know the rules of the road, learn basic vehicle control skills, and have been introduced to safe driving information.

Near-term efforts to reduce teen crashes should focus on encouraging States to strengthen their GDL laws to include provisions demonstrated to be effective in reducing teen crash rates. This includes adopting a three-stage GDL system that incorporates a learner's stage, a provisional license, and finally an unrestricted license. A strong GDL system should provide the novice driver the opportunity to gain experience driving with a fully licensed adult driver under all conditions, including daytime and nighttime, adverse weather, high-speed roads, and congested traffic. The provisional license should contain the following restrictions, which have been shown to reduce teen crashes:

- Restricted nighttime driving;
- Limiting the number of teenage passengers;
- Mandatory seat belt use;
- Zero tolerance for alcohol and drugs; and
- Delayed transition to an unrestricted license until the driver meets a minimum 1-year period of violation-free driving.

NHTSA's Vehicle and Behavioral Safety Research Office has several ongoing projects examining the feasibility and potential of monitoring systems to encourage safer driving behavior by teens. One project is currently determining the specific driving behaviors that should be monitored to reduce risky driving by teens, including using data from naturalistic driving to learn how novice teen driving behavior changes over the first 18 months of driving. Another study is looking at commercially available monitoring systems, coupled with weekly feedback to parents of teen drivers to reduce risky driving behavior and crashes. These projects are still in formative stages, but may eventually result in systems for voluntary use by parents who want to enhance the safety of their children as they learn to drive.

In addition, NHTSA is examining a closer integration of driver education with graduated driver licensing programs for novice drivers that would involve a multistage driver education program. For example, the first stage of such an integrated system might involve teaching novice drivers the rules of the road and basic vehicle control skills. Later, when the novice drivers progress to the provisional license phase, they would be required to take a course that focuses on safe driving. Whether this approach would prove beneficial in reducing teen driver crashes remains to be seen.

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APPENDIX

Traffic Safety Education
Life Long Learning Process
Driver Education Standards
http://adtsea.iup.edu/adtsea/pdf/ADTSEA%20Standards.pdf

The "Driver Education and In-Car Curriculum" was developed to provide current information and techniques on teaching novice drivers the basics of motor vehicle operation. It was developed specifically to reference four textbooks:

Drive Right, 10th edition, published by Prentice Hall
Today's Handbook Plus, 1999 edition, published by NTSA International
How to Drive, 9th edition, published by the American Automobile Association
Responsible Driving, 2006 edition, published by Glencoe/McGraw-Hill

If a driver education program is using a textbook not listed above, the program will need to match the appropriate reading material of the text it is using in the "Resources" column of the curriculum. **It is recommended that each classroom instructor receive and use a copy of the teacher's edition of one of the textbooks and that each student receive and use a copy of the textbook while in the driver education program.** The choice of text is left to the discretion of each individual school. Any of the four textbooks listed above will meet the requirements of a quality driver education program. Also, instructors and students should have a copy of their State's "Driver's Handbook" for use in the program. The "Driver Education Classroom and In-Car Curriculum" guide is divided into 10 units. These units will assist in the coordination of 45 hours of classroom instruction. Also included are a Skills Log and an In-Car Guide. Eight hours of in-car instruction are grouped into the In-Car guide and alternate forms of the final exam are provided along with unit exams.

Package content:
DVD Disc 1 - ADTSEA DVD Curriculum (includes over 1 hour of video)

DVD Content (Audio/Video format)
- Unit 1 - Introduction to Novice Driver Responsibilities and the Licensing System
- Unit 2 - Introducing Operator and Vehicle Control Tasks in a Controlled Environment
- Unit 3 - Space Management System
- Unit 4 - Basic Maneuvering Tasks
- Unit 5 - Risk Reducing Strategies for High-Speed Multi-lane Expressways
- Unit 6 - Personal Factors Influencing Operator Performance
- Unit 7 - Environmental Conditions That Affect Safe Vehicle Operation
- Unit 8 - Vehicle Functions and Malfunctions, and Collision Reporting
- Unit 9 - Sharing the Road With Commercial Motor Vehicles
- Unit 10 - Reducing the Influence of Distractions on the Driving Task

PC Content (PDF format, printable)
- Unit 1 - Introduction to Novice Driver Responsibilities and the Licensing System
- Unit 2 - Introducing Operator and Vehicle Control Tasks in a Controlled Environment

Unit 3 - Space Management System
Unit 4 - Basic Maneuvering Tasks
Unit 5 - Risk Reducing Strategies for High-Speed Multi-lane Expressways
Unit 6 - Personal Factors Influencing Operator Performance
Unit 7 - Environmental Conditions That Affect Safe Vehicle Operation
Unit 8 - Vehicle Functions and Malfunctions, and Collision Reporting
Unit 9 - Sharing the Road With Commercial Motor Vehicles
Unit 10 - Reducing the Influence of Distractions on the Driving Task
Unit Tests (1-10)
Final Exam Form A
Final Exam Form B
In-car, Behind the Wheel Lessons
Parent Mentor Home Practice Guide

DVD Disc 2 - AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety Videos (total video time: about 1 hour)

"Using Your Eyes Effectively"
"Managing Space and Time"
"Freeway Driving"
"Sharing the Road"

DVD Disc 3 - American Automobile Association (total video time: over ½ hour)

"Teaching Your Teens to Drive"
Lesson 1 - Developing Basic Vehicle Control
Lesson 2 - Moving, Turning, Stopping and Securing the Vehicle
Lesson 3 - Maneuvering in Light Traffic
Lesson 4 - Maneuvering in Moderate Traffic
Lesson 5 - Backing and Turning Maneuvers
Lesson 6 - Assessing Highway Conditions
Lesson 7 - Identifying Traffic Control Devices
Lesson 8 - Searching for Clues to Motor Vehicle Conflicts
Lesson 9 - Searching for Clues From Non-Motorized Road Users
Lesson 10 - Positioning and Timing at Intersections
Lesson 11 - Positioning and Timing When Following and Meeting Other Vehicles
Lesson 12 - Critical Time/Space Decisions
Lesson 13 - Adverse Driving Conditions
Appendix - Parent-Teen Contract

DVD Disc 4 - AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety (total video time: about 17 minutes)

"Signs, Signals, and Marking, Understanding the Language of the Road"

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