

Technical Brief 4 – April 26, 2021

The Effect of COVID-19 on Teen’s Driving Practice & Parent Approval for Proposed Changes to Licensing Requirements in North Carolina

The Issue

In [Technical Brief 2](#), we described initial findings on the effect of COVID-19 on young drivers in North Carolina. New permits and licenses dropped off sharply beginning March 2020 because of closures and/or restrictions at licensing offices and decreased access to driver education classes. Crashes also decreased, likely reflecting fewer trips by young drivers since schools and other activities were canceled.

In this Technical Brief, we describe how COVID-19 affected practice among teens in the learner (supervised) phase of graduated driver licensing (GDL). In North Carolina, new drivers are required to have a permit for 12 months and to get 60 hours of supervised practice prior to licensure. Prior research shows that most of this driving practice occurs during routine trips to school and extracurricular activities.¹ With in-person schools closed and most activities canceled, opportunities for driving practice have been curtailed, potentially reducing the amount of driving practice teens receive during the learner period.

We also examined support among parents for proposed changes to licensing requirements in North Carolina. Due to the perceived burden of COVID-19 on young drivers and their families, many states have introduced or passed legislation to relax the licensing requirements currently in place for new teenage drivers. Although well-intended, it is important to consider the potential safety implications of these policy changes. For example, several states have waived the road-test requirement for new drivers in an effort to reduce the spread of the coronavirus. There is concern among the traffic safety community that by eliminating the road test, new drivers do not have a standard level of demonstrated driving proficiency. Teens and their parents take the test seriously, engaging in substantial amounts of driving practice to ensure the teen is ready to pass the road test. Removing this clear goal in the licensing process will likely result in teen drivers getting less driving practice than they would otherwise.²

Study Approach: Survey of Parents of Teen Drivers

To learn how COVID-19 impacted supervised driving and to gauge parents’ support for legislative efforts to address the problem, we conducted an online survey with 236 parents of teen drivers who had a learner permit in March 2020. Parents were recruited through the North Carolina Driver Education Network and emails sent to all UNC Chapel Hill employees. Links to the survey were also shared on social media via Facebook Groups and posts on NextDoor. Responses were received from parents in 43 of North Carolina’s 100 counties. Three-fourths (74%) of the participants were mothers and half (52%) of the participants’ teenagers were female. At the end of the survey, parents were invited to participate in follow-up online focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was to obtain more detailed information about how COVID-19 affected families’ driving practice. We conducted six focus groups lasting one hour each with a total of 36 parents.



Survey Results: COVID-19 and Supervised Driving Practice

Practice driving decreased sharply after the state-wide shutdown. Parents reported that before the shutdown teens practiced driving an average of 3.5 days per week compared to 1 day a week after the shutdown. Almost two-thirds of parents (64%) said that after the shutdown, they were concerned their teen was not getting enough practice (see Figure 1). Additionally, 63% said it was hard to practice driving after the shutdown. In the surveys and focus groups, many parents commented that practice driving opportunities were greatly reduced by COVID-19. Parents in the focus group also noted that the practice their teen was getting was not “real-world” practice because the volume of cars on the road was so low.

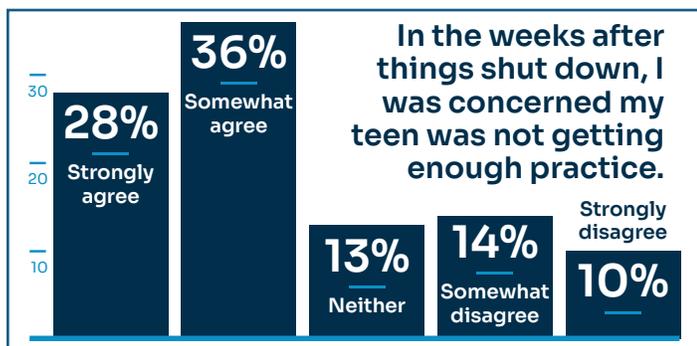


Figure 1. Parent responses to survey question about quantity of teen driving practice during COVID-19 in NC.

“Prior to the shutdown, we drove 25-30 minutes to school and to many activities on a daily basis. We mostly stayed home after the shutdown. If we did leave, our children stayed home, for the most part.”

“Nobody in the household was driving very much, and there were not many places to go.”

“We had to schedule driving or come up with an activity to drive to instead of having her drive to do normal things such as groceries, going to after school activities, etc.”

“There was nowhere for us to go and with me not working I didn’t have extra money to spend on gas to just drive around town.”

“We did not go anywhere. For 3 months our children literally never set foot inside a building other than our house.”

Survey Results: COVID-19 and Parental Support of Legislative Changes

Parents were also asked about legislation impacting young drivers in North Carolina. In July 2020, North Carolina waived the road-test requirement for new drivers. Parents were split in their approval for this measure. As shown in Figure 2, 46% of parents approved and 45% disapproved of teens getting licensed without taking a road test. At the same time, 62% of parents said the thought of teenagers getting a license without taking a road test would make them feel somewhat or very uncomfortable (see Figure 3). Parents’ conflicted feelings were reflected in their comments on the surveys and during the focus groups.

“It is really important to have a third-party observer help determine if the child is ready for driving. It makes me very nervous how every family decides this on their own and puts a great deal of pressure on the parents if they are trying to do the right thing. Some families choose to just get the license from what we have heard, even if their child isn’t ready.”

“I am not sure the road test is necessary. If you have actually been driving with your parents as the law requires, parents have already tested their children. Of course, the problem is with parents who don’t actually require their teens to do the driving and they just sign the paper and then let them drive.”

“I am glad my son could get his license without taking a driving test. However, it does concern me because not all teens are as responsible and careful as he is.”

“There’s nothing magical about 10 minutes with the examiner, but there is some utility to it and perhaps just knowing that you have to prepare for that means they’re going to be more prepared than they would otherwise.”

“An adult driver, I fear for the world of all these drivers being unleashed without going through a normal certification process.”

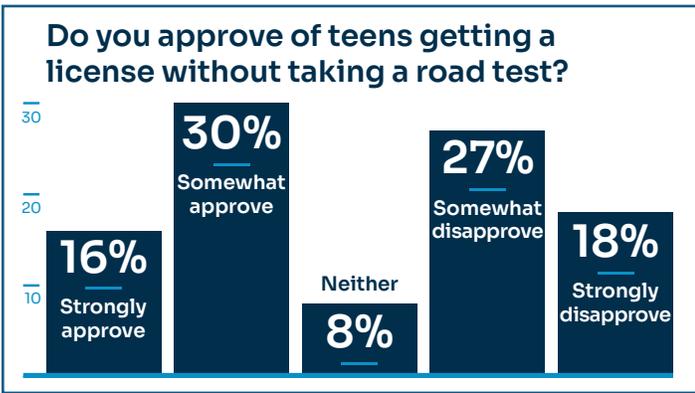


Figure 2. Parent responses to survey question about legislation impacting young drivers during COVID-19 in NC.

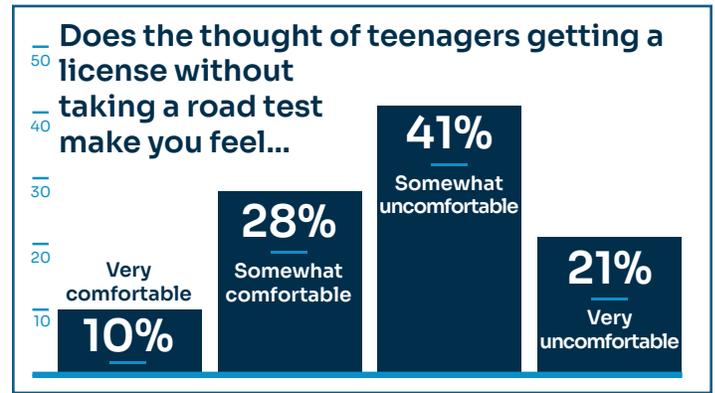


Figure 3. Parent responses to survey question about eliminating the road test requirement in NC.

Another bill under consideration in North Carolina would reduce the learner permit phase from 12 months to 6 months. As shown in Figure 4, two-thirds (67%) of parents said they disagreed with this proposal. Sample comments from parents include:

“We feel that learning to drive is an important enough lifelong skill that the driving process shouldn’t be fast-tracked.”

“The idea that we’re going to reduce what little we have in place for the safety, for reasons completely unrelated to road safety, to me is a problem.”

“I am terrified because I, as a parent, want to make sure that my kid is safe and the basic hours were not enough for me.”

“I don’t think that the duration of the permit holding should be shortened at all because they do a lot of maturing in a year.”

“I have a problem with shortening that time period, because I mean, that’s the time when the parents are there to supervise.”

“I’d like to see him not do the mistakes that I made. The more time that he gets with us, I think, is the best thing.”

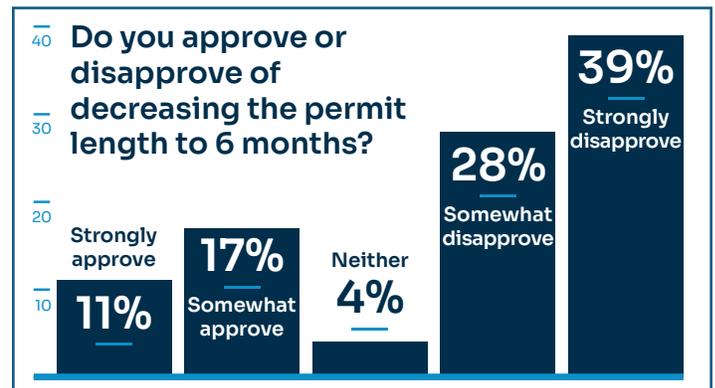
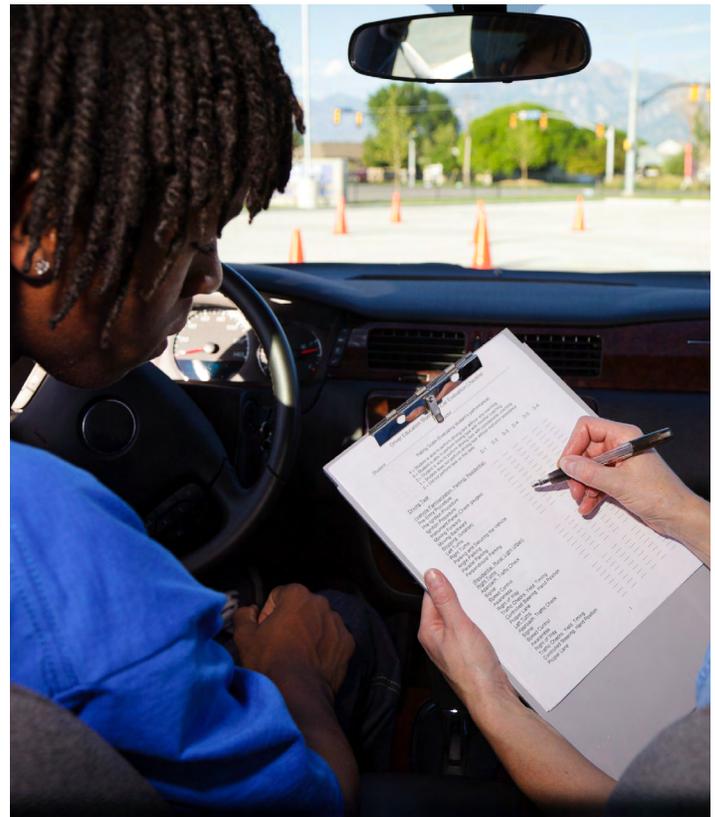


Figure 4. Parent responses to survey question about reducing the learner permit phase from 12 months to 6 months.

Implications

The findings from this study suggest that teens received substantially less driving practice after the COVID-19 shutdown. While the effect of eliminating the road test is not yet known, it seems likely the combination of fewer practice opportunities and no road test requirement could result in greater numbers of unqualified, inexperienced new drivers. Parents in North Carolina do not support reducing the current 12-month learner period. Reducing the learner period would increase teen crashes and fatalities because teens would have even fewer opportunities to practice than they did prior to COVID-19. We are continuing to track licensing and crashes to assess the longer-term effect of COVID-19 and legislative actions.

References

- 1 Goodwin, A., Foss, R., Margolis, L. & Waller, M. (2010). Parents, teens and the learner stage of Graduated Driver Licensing. Washington, DC: AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety
- 2 Ehsani, J. (2020). Adolescent driver testing during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 67, 743-744.

About the Project

The NC COVID-19 Mobility and Health Impacts Study is investigating COVID-19 data trends in NC. Led by the [UNC Highway Safety Research Center](#), this project brings together an impressive team of multidisciplinary research partners from across the UNC System, including UNC-CH's Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research, Gillings School of Global Public Health, Odum Institute for Research in Social Science, and the NC State University Department of Statistics, to research the interrelationships of public health policies, mobility changes, and the transmission of COVID-19 to inform policy decisions in North Carolina. This project is supported by the North Carolina Policy Collaboratory at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill with funding from the North Carolina Coronavirus Relief Fund established and appropriated by the North Carolina General Assembly.



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