

## **Ontario's 20-year graduated licensing system has saved lives, but experts say more can be done.**

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By Alex Migdal

GUELPH—Canada's graduated licensing system has been heralded as the "gold standard" since Ontario became the first North American jurisdiction in 1994 to introduce the legislation.

But 20 years later, the Ontario government has failed to adopt recommendations that experts say would lead to further safety benefits.

After passing a learner's exam, new drivers must undergo two stages: a G1 learning period that requires the supervision of a licensed driver and, following a road test, an intermediate G2 stage that requires a zero blood alcohol level. Both terms last a minimum of 12 months.

But the government issues a four-month "time discount" to novice G1 drivers who complete an approved driver's education course. When credited, a driver can take the G2 road test in eight months instead of 12.

A 2005 report on graduated licensing by the Traffic Injury Research Foundation urged jurisdictions to eliminate time discounts.

"The practice of reducing the length of time in the graduated licensing program for successfully completing a driver education course is questionable at best," cautioned the report, which pointed to similar research.

The collision risk for novice drivers who receive the time discount increases 13-fold during their first four months in the G2 stage.

Proposals presented to the Ministry of Transportation in 2009 sought to increase the length of time drivers are required to spend in G1 and G2 from a minimum of 12 months to 18 months. G1 drivers would still be eligible for a six-month time discount.

Transportation Minister Jim Bradley removed the proposal from the road safety bill in May 2009.

The Ministry said the extension was perceived to be "excessive" compared to other jurisdictions. It was also concerned about the potential negative impacts on teens, their families and new Canadians obtaining their licenses.

The Ministry said it is aware of past research that has raised concerns about time discounts.

"While there are currently no plans to increase the duration of graduated licensing, ministry staff continue to review research and jurisdictional best practices," the Ministry said in a written statement.

Dan Mayhew, senior vice-president with the Traffic Injury Research Foundation and one of the country's leading experts on graduating licensing, said time discounts are contrary to graduated licensing principles, which are based on time in the system.

"I can understand there's always tension between a need to maintain safety and mobility," he said. "But I would urge (the government) to rethink the value of a time discount from a safety perspective. . . . I don't think it's necessarily good policy to expose novice drivers to greater crash risks sooner than you have to."

Mayhew pointed to British Columbia and New Zealand, which was the first country to implement graduated licensing in 1987, as jurisdictions that have reshaped their policies.

The B.C. government allows drivers to take the advanced road test after 18 months instead of 24 months if they complete an approved driver's training course. In New Zealand, passing an approved advanced driving course cuts students' waiting time from 18 months to 12 months.

In 2012, an internal Ontario Ministry of Transportation assessment concluded that teen G2 drivers who had completed driver's training were 12 per cent less likely to be involved in a fatal collision than a teen driver without training.

The Ministry noted not all students will take advantage of the time discount.

The Ontario government recommends students gain 50 hours of supervised experience before attempting the G2 road test. But there's no way to guarantee that number, since the government doesn't ask for certification from a parent or supervisor.

Yukon, for instance, requires proof of 50 hours of practice time through a signed declaration. In Sweden, novices with 126 hours of supervised driving experience are a 35 per cent lower crash risk than those with 40 hours.

"Drivers who have not built sufficient skill through practice will have difficulty passing these tests," the Ontario Ministry said in a written response, noting drivers must sign a declaration of highway driving experience to complete the G2 exit test.

The Insurance Bureau of Canada, which backed the Traffic Injury Research Foundation's 2005 report, has also lobbied for strengthening the countries graduated licensing.

New motorists considering driver's education are enticed with insurance discounts, on top of a 10 per cent reduction for one year of ticket- and accident-free G1 experience.

Pete Karageorgos, the insurance bureau's director of consumer and industry relations in Ontario, said some insurers also offer discounts to students with strong academic results.

"The philosophy behind that is there's likely a correlation between students who are focused on doing well academically and recognize the responsibility that they have behind the wheel of a car," he said.

Karageorgos said insurers are gradually implementing usage-based, or telematics insurance, based on a device that's plugged in the vehicle and tracks factors such as distanced travelled, time of day and acceleration speeds. Novice drivers, he said, may qualify for a discount if they're driving responsibly.

Despite calls for improvement, government officials, traffic experts and parents unequivocally agree that graduated licensing has saved lives.

"We certainly have been supportive of graduated licensing for many decades and it's something we continue to support wholeheartedly," Mayhew said.

Ontario's collision rate among drivers aged 16 to 19 dropped by 31 per cent in 1995 compared to 1993, the year before the province introduced legislation.

Between 2006 and 2010, the last five years of available data, Ontario saw a 58 per cent decline in the average fatality rate for drivers aged 16 to 19 compared to the five years before the introduction of graduated licensing.

And between 1991 and 2010, the number of drivers aged 16 to 19 involved in collisions per 10,000 licensed drivers fell by 57 per cent — despite a 50 per cent increase in the number of licensed young drivers.

At the same time, authorities continue to crack down on drivers who fail to follow the system. About 44,000 graduated licensing sanctions were issued between August 2010 and July 2013. Approximately 17,000 of those stemmed from violating a novice condition, such as maintaining a zero blood alcohol level.

Roughly 27,000 sanctions came from convictions with four or more demerit points, such as following too closely while 397 were for court-ordered suspensions.

The Ministry of Transportation has introduced enhancements to the system over the years. In 2004, it limited the number of passengers a teen G2 driver can carry between midnight and 5 a.m.

In 2007, it regulated the driver's education industry and, two years later, required driving schools to follow a ministry-approved curriculum.

And in 2010, it enforced a zero blood alcohol level for all motorists aged 21 and under, along with escalating sanctions for repeat violations of graduated licensing conditions.

A 1999 survey of 520 Ontario parents with teenagers in the program found they "overwhelmingly" supported graduated licensing and approved of the individual restrictions. Mayhew, one of the survey's co-authors, said that support continues today.

Rodger Peaire, whose 17-year-old son, Jason, died in a 1993 crash in Guelph along with two of his friends, only wishes the system had come sooner.

Twenty-one years later, he still struggles to rationalize his son's death. What if the driver, a newly licensed 16-year-old, was barred from carrying passengers? Would Jason have avoided the wreckage?

"I firmly believe, or at least I would really like to believe, that had graduated licensing been in place, that accident never would have happened."

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