

The State of Driver Education A Review of Recent Driver Education Studies

Background

Driver education provides an efficient and effective means to teach new drivers the rules of the road as well as the knowledge, attitudes, and skills to operate a vehicle on our highways. It typically consists of both “theoretical” classroom instruction and “practical” training in the vehicle (e.g., 30 hours of in-class instruction and 6 to 8 hours of behind-the-wheel training (BTW)). Online and virtual driver education programs are now increasingly available in response to restrictions imposed by COVID-19 (e.g., classroom closures, shelter at home, social distancing) in addition to or in lieu of classroom instruction.

Driver education is most often available to young people through either public secondary schools and/or driving schools that are privately owned and operated. Driver education is a mandatory requirement in 33 states to obtain an intermediate license, but in the others, it is not required, although provisions may be in place to encourage teens to take driver education (e.g., obtain a learner or provisional/intermediate license at an earlier age, fewer hours of supervised driving practice required).

Recent Studies

Driver education is recognized and promoted as a safety measure that dates back to the early 1930s. Although past evaluations have reported results that often challenged its safety benefits (see reviews by Mayhew et al. 2002; Lonero and Mayhew 2010), recent studies in Nebraska (Shell et al. 2015), Oregon (Mayhew et al. 2014), Georgia (Strategic Research Group 2021), and Ohio (Walshe et al. 2022) suggest that driver education continues to hold promise for reducing collisions. All four studies applied evaluation methods that improved upon earlier study designs, including the use of large populations rather than the small samples typically used in randomized evaluation studies, which are prone to sample attrition and reduced power. These studies also controlled for key demographic variables, which was not always the case in earlier investigations.

Studies	Approach	Findings
Nebraska and Oregon	The studies evaluated the safety effectiveness of their state-wide driver education programs	Reported reductions in crashes of 5-15%; and, in traffic violations of 40% or more
Georgia	The study examined the effectiveness of the Georgia Driver’s Education Commission (GDEC) scholarship program and different methods of delivering driver education in reducing crashes and convictions for young drivers	Found that classroom instruction with BTW instructor hours had fewer convictions, crashes, serious injuries, and deaths than other delivery methods, including, classroom instruction with parent/ teen driving guide; online instruction with BTW instructor hours, and online instruction with parent/teen driving guide
Ohio	The study evaluated the effectiveness of comprehensive licensing requirements (graduated driver licensing, driver education, and BTW training) on the crashes of drivers younger than 18 years	Reported that those licensed younger than 18 years, subject to these licensing policies, had lower crash rates than those licensed at 18 years, exempt from them

Similar to previous evaluations, however, these studies have limitations, primarily due to the lack of random subject assignment and only controlling for a few key factors. It is possible that other factors related to self-selection might still account for some or all the differences in collisions and not just having taken driver education. A further limitation of the Georgia study is the absence of a control group of young drivers who have not taken driver education, and consequently, the study did not allow for a direct comparison of young drivers with and without driver education. In the Ohio study, the positive results relate to the comprehensive licensing requirements, so it is not possible to assess the safety effectiveness of driver education, separately, from those of graduated driver licensing. The strengths and limitations of these studies need to be taken into consideration in future efforts to evaluate the safety effects of driver education.

Previous Developments

Although there are similarities in driver education programs, there is considerable variation in their content and delivery across states and within some states. As well, in some states responsibility for public driver education and private driving schools resides in different agencies often with limited coordination, communication, and cooperation. In an effort to enhance the quality and uniformity of driver education programs across the U.S., the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) funded a series of projects designed to improve the quality, consistency and delivery of driver education programs and to create appropriate tools to inform and guide state initiatives to improve state driver education programs. A broad cross-section of experts representing different disciplines has been engaged in this work to provide states with the most current research and practice regarding this road safety issue.

One of the efforts that NHTSA supported was the formation of an association of major stakeholders in 2010, known as the “Association of National Stakeholders in Traffic Safety Education” (ANSTSE). ANSTSE is comprised of a variety of traffic safety stakeholders, including:

- AAA,
- American Association of Motor Vehicle Administrators (AAMVA),
- American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association (ADSTEA),
- Association of Driver Rehabilitation Specialists (ADED),
- Driver Education and Training Administrators (DETA),
- Driving School Association of the Americas (DSAA),
- Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA), and
- Transportation Research Board (TRB).

Recent Developments

The Association, with the support of NHTSA, has developed the Novice Teen Driver Education and Training Administrative Standards (NTDETAS). The NTDETAS were originally published in 2009, revised in 2017, and most recently revised in 2023. The 2023 edition includes standards on risk/emergency preparedness; virtual classroom training; prerequisites, training and, requirements for candidate instructor trainers and mentors; driver education testing for licensure; and increasing access to parent/guardian involvement. The 2023 version can be accessed at (www.anstse.info). The NTDETAS also references the 2017 model training curriculum for the teaching task instructor’s guide. The 2023 version of the NTDETAS has recently been reviewed and updated by ANSTSE with the assistance of NHTSA and stakeholders in driver education, traffic safety, and research.

The NTDETAS are recommended and intended to serve as a model to guide all novice teen driver education and training programs. The NTDETAS provide a tool for States to assess their strengths, accomplishments, and opportunities to assure quality, consistent, and equitable driver education and training is provided. Of note, the implementation of the Standards can be approached incrementally so it is manageable for states to achieve.

ANSTSE, NHTSA, the State Administrator's Working Group, and a Data Collection Expert Working Group developed a Driver Education Data Collection Guide which provides methods for identifying, accessing, collecting, and analyzing (partnerships) best or most appropriate data relevant to driver education.

In response to COVID-19, ANSTSE, with the assistance of NHTSA and expert working groups, prepared and published a report on *Stopgap Measures in Driver Education During a Pandemic or an Emergency* (ANSTSE 2020). This report provides temporary solutions for behind-the-wheel instruction, end-of-course knowledge testing and driving performance assessment during a pandemic or an emergency.

ANSTSE has also developed and maintains the website www.anstse.info with tools and resources, such as the NTDETAS, model training curriculum for the teaching task, NHTSA State Driver Education Assessment reports, information on requesting ANSTSE Consultation Services provided to states by key experts in the field, as well as the NTDETAS State Self-Assessment Tool, a free online instrument for States to gauge how their current teen driver education program aligns with the NTDETAS

NHTSA also maintains a website that includes information, research, and resources on teen driving and driver education <https://www.nhtsa.gov/road-safety/teen-driving>.

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