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Examination of State Legislation Related To Novice Drivers (2017–2021)

Background

Novice drivers face disproportionately high risk of motor vehicle crashes, attributed to a lack of driving experience and underdeveloped skills like hazard anticipation. State graduated driver licensing (GDL) programs address these issues with a phased licensing approach that combines supervised practice with gradual exposure to independent driving. Rigorous evaluations have found GDL programs that are more restrictive effectively decrease crashes and fatalities among teen novice drivers (see Kirley et al., 2023, for a review). However, some researchers have described a "slowdown" in the past 10 to 15 years in the rate at which States adopt stronger GDL policies (Williams et al., 2016). To investigate this trend, the current study briefly summarized in this Traffic Tech used quantitative analyses of legislation data and a series of legislative case studies to describe State novice driver-related legislation introduced from 2017 to 2021 and identify factors associated with bills being enacted or making more legislative progress. For detailed findings as well as more information about the methods and supporting references, please see the associated full report by Darrah et al. (2026) at: https://doi.org/10.21949/02wk-3827.

Methods

For the quantitative portion of the study, the research team identified, reviewed, and coded 335 bills related to GDL, driver education, and other novice driver topics introduced in the 50 U.S. States from 2017 to 2021. The team also collected legislation-level data (e.g., details of a bill's topic, characteristics of the bill's sponsor, and whether the bill would make a State's GDL program overall more or less restrictive) and State-level demographic characteristics, like the percentage of the population living in urban areas. The team used descriptive analyses, correlations, multilevel logistic regression, and ordinal regression models to assess the likelihood of a bill being enacted or making more legislative progress (i.e., getting further in the legislative process).

For the qualitative portion of the study, eight diverse bills were selected for in-depth case studies involving stakeholder interviews with bill sponsors, advocacy groups, and individuals from State Highway Safety Offices and licensing agencies.

Results

Quantitative Analyses

Descriptive analyses revealed that 72 of the 335 proposed bills (21.5%) were enacted (Figure 1). While about 16 percent of bills making State GDL programs more restrictive or adding a new restriction (subcomponent) were enacted, 34 percent of bills making State GDL programs less restrictive were enacted (Figure 2). However, there were no significant correlations between State-level demographic and traffic safety characteristics and the percentages of novice driver-related bills enacted across States.

Multi-level logistic regression and ordinal regression analyses revealed bills making a State's GDL program less restrictive had significantly higher odds of being enacted or making more legislative progress. Regression models also indicated bills introduced in the upper (vs. lower) legislative chamber, bills introduced in 2017 (vs. 2020), and bills having a sponsor affiliated with the State's majority political party had higher odds of enactment. Bills with a companion bill (bills simultaneously introduced in both legislative bodies during the same legislative year) had lower odds of enactment.

Figure 1. Bills Introduced and Enacted (2017–2021) (*N* = 335)

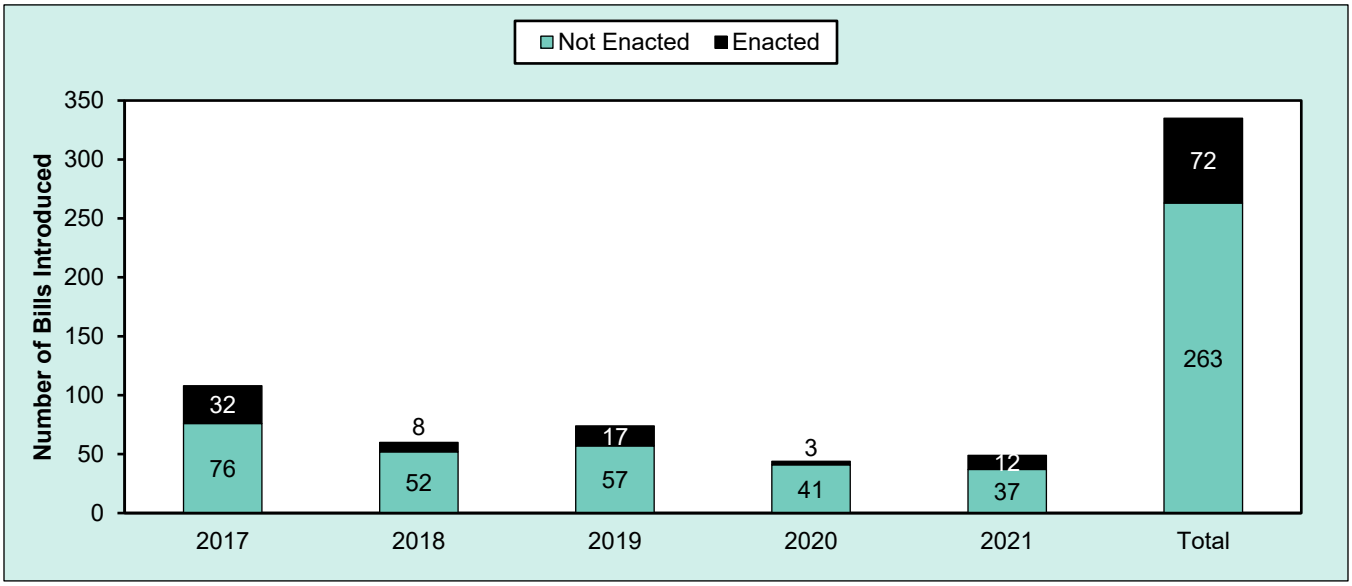
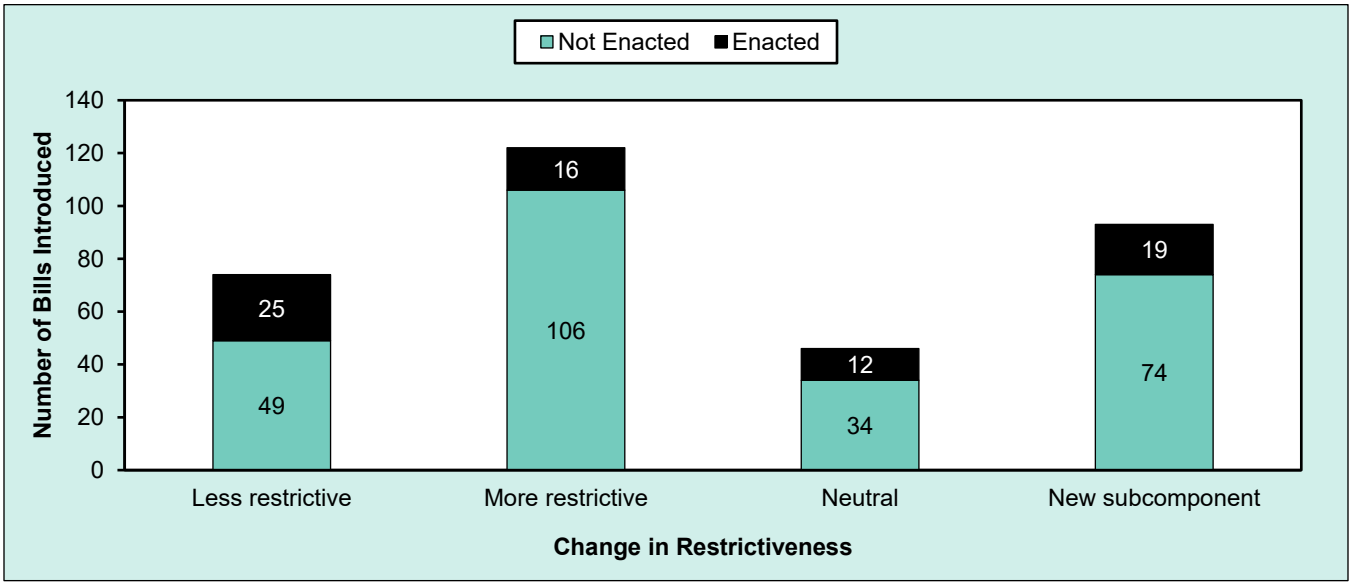


Figure 2. Bills Introduced and Enacted by Change in Restrictiveness (2017–2021) (*N* = 335)



Legislation Case Studies

Interviews with stakeholders who typically participate in the legislative process revealed interviewees believed other traffic safety legislation, such as impaired or distracted driving, was prioritized over improving GDL laws. Interviewees noted opposition to more restrictive GDL laws included a lack of transportation alternatives for teenagers commuting to work or school, particularly in rural areas. Consequently, interviewees felt legislation lessening GDL restrictions often progresses out of a desire to increase mobility for teens and reduce administrative burdens on licensing agencies, young drivers, and their families.

Discussion

The results from this study may provide insight into the "slowdown" in the passage of more restrictive State GDL laws described by Williams and colleagues (2016). In particular, although this study did not examine whether less novice driver-related legislation was introduced between 2017 and 2021 relative to the 1990s (when States began passing GDL laws), the results do suggest there has more recently been a slowdown in the *enactment* of legislation making State GDL laws more restrictive.

NHTSA's *Countermeasures That Work* (Kirley et al., 2023), a reference to assist in selecting effective, science-based traffic safety countermeasures, rates GDL as a "five-star" countermeasure, with the most restrictive GDL programs associated with the largest reductions in fatal and injury crashes among teen drivers. Even so, the results from the current study indicate bills that reduce restrictions overall are currently more likely to be made into law, potentially due to concerns about limiting mobility and the accessibility of driver licenses. The results of this study can inform States and SHSOs seeking to understand other States' recent experiences with legislation to change GDL laws. The results can also inform the direction of research on novice driver safety, particularly the need for evaluations of changes to GDL laws that lessen restrictions or requirements for licensure.

References

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