



Teen Impaired Driving Prevention

Responsibility.org Position:

Responsibility.org is dedicated to eliminating all forms of impaired driving. As part of this commitment, we support comprehensive teen driving safety laws including zero-tolerance policies that make it illegal for teens to drive with any measurable amount of alcohol or any other impairing substance in their system, as well as impaired driving prevention awareness curricula in driver training programs.

While this paper primarily focuses on teen drunk and impaired driving prevention, we also support other non-impaired driving related laws designed to protect teen drivers and other roadway users. These include primary safety belt requirements, graduated driver licensing, and complete bans on texting and cell phone use while driving for novice teen drivers.

This paper includes the most current and relevant data for this position as of Jan. 8, 2026.

Overview:

Neuroscience has firmly established that young people are hard-wired for risk-taking in their early teens, making their reckless behavior troubling but not surprising. Adolescence is also a critical period of neurodevelopment, and factors like underage drinking have been shown to negatively affect cognition and function (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2024).

The minimum legal drinking age (MLDA) of 21 remains a key policy in restricting access to alcohol and curbing underage drinking, which subsequently helps reduce drinking and driving among those under 21. Encouragingly, half of high school seniors have never consumed alcohol, and lifetime consumption of alcohol among 12th graders has decreased 45% proportionally from 1991 to 2025 (Miech et al., 2025).

Despite this progress, underage drinking and driving remains a factor in alcohol-related crashes among people under 21. From 2014 to 2023, the number of drivers aged 15 to 20 involved in fatal crashes with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) of 0.01 g/dL or higher increased by 36% (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration [NHTSA], 2025).

To mitigate these risks, teen driving safety laws, such as zero-tolerance BAC laws and driver education programs that address drunk and impaired driving, aim to enhance teen driver safety. The term *teen driver* typically refers to individuals ages 15 to 20, though the exact age range may vary by study or organization.

In most states, zero-tolerance laws establish a maximum BAC of less than 0.02 g/dL for drivers under 21 and are proven to reduce alcohol-related crashes and injuries (Voas & Lacey, 2011). However, enforcement of these laws varies widely across states and is not well-documented. Researchers have discovered that these laws are more easily enforced in states where violations are treated as administrative offenses rather than criminal ones, which allows for immediate license suspension without a court conviction, and where officers can use preliminary breath testing devices at the roadside to determine compliance (Jones & Lacey, 2001).

According to [NHTSA's Countermeasures That Work](#), zero-tolerance laws are most effective when enforced during routine patrols or targeted enforcement periods when underage drinking is more likely to occur.

Additionally, driver education, which can include instruction on the dangers of drunk and impaired driving, can be a critical component of improving roadway safety for teen drivers. Requirements vary by state: some mandate formal instruction for all drivers under 18 with their parent or legal guardian, while others do not. In many states, it is integrated into the graduated driver licensing (GDL) system, which requires young drivers, between the ages of 14 and 18 depending on the state, to demonstrate safe and responsible driving behavior at each stage before progressing to the next (Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, 2025). An analysis of existing research by NHTSA shows that state GDL programs reduced crashes by 16% for 16-year-olds and 11% for 17-year-olds (NHTSA, 2015).

See Responsibility.org's [webpage on underage drinking](#) and policy position on [MLDA laws](#) to learn more. Additional details on state GDL laws are available on the [Insurance Institute for Highway Safety's website](#).

Prevalence:

Zero-Tolerance Laws:

Zero-tolerance laws have been in effect in every state since 1998 (NHTSA, 2023).

Impaired Driving Awareness in Driver's Education Curriculum:

The curriculum in states where driver education is required or offered may include impaired driving awareness to emphasize the risks of alcohol and drug use behind the wheel. For example, Georgia, Michigan, New Mexico, and Virginia have specific impaired driving education requirements for an individual under 18 applying for a driver's license:

- [In Georgia](#), driver's license applicants under age 18 seeking a provisional license must meet several requirements, including completing a driver education course and an alcohol and drug awareness course that features a voluntary parent or guardian participation component.

- [Michigan requires](#) teens under the age of 18 who would like to learn how to drive to complete driver education as a component of the state's GDL requirements. [The curriculum](#) must include information on risk awareness factors for young drivers including impaired driving.
- [In New Mexico](#), teens under the age of 18 seeking their first driver's license must successfully complete a driver education course that includes DUI prevention and education approved by the state Traffic Safety Division or offered by a public school.
- [Virginia requires](#) driver education programs to include instruction on alcohol and drug abuse, among other risky behaviors. The curriculum must also incorporate a component, delivered to both students and if available, their parent or legal guardians, focused on the dangers of impaired driving and underage alcohol consumption.

Research Highlights:

- According to NHTSA, 2,611 people were killed in crashes involving a teen driver (15 to 18 years old) in 2023, including 822 who were the teen driver (NHTSA, 2025).
- In 2023, 30% of young drivers 15 to 20 years old who were killed in a traffic crash had a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level of 0.01 g/dL or higher, and 26% had a BAC of 0.08 g/dL or higher (NHTSA, 2025).
- Teen drivers aged 16 to 20 years old with BACs between 0.05 g/dL and 0.079 g/dL are 12 times more likely to die in single-vehicle crashes compared to their sober peers (Voas et al., 2012).
- Voas et al. (2003) conducted an analysis of data on all drivers younger than 21 who were involved in fatal crashes in the U.S. from 1982 to 1997. The researchers found that raising the minimum legal drinking age to 21 and establishing a zero-tolerance BAC law for young drivers resulted in substantial reductions in alcohol-positive involvement in fatal crashes.
- An analysis of Washington state's zero-tolerance law found that arrests for alcohol-related violations among drivers aged 16 to 20 increased by approximately 50% once the law went into effect (McCartt et al., 2007).
- Drunk driving can also co-occur with other forms of high-risk behavior. In 2022, 47% of young drivers aged 15 to 20 involved in fatal crashes who had alcohol in their systems were unrestrained, and 67% of the young drivers who were drinking at the time of the crash were killed (NHTSA, 2024).
- Regardless of the strength of their state's teen driving laws, parents can enforce safe driving rules. According to the 2006 National Young Driver Survey, teens with authoritative parents, those who set clear rules and consistently monitor behavior, were 71% less likely to drive while intoxicated compared to teens with uninvolved parents who provided little guidance or oversight (Ginsburg et al., 2009).

Established in 1991 as a national not-for-profit organization, Responsibility.org leads the fight to eliminate drunk and impaired driving and underage drinking.

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