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## Fewer Youths Jump Behind the Wheel at 16

By MARY M. CHAPMAN and [MICHELINE MAYNARD](#)

DETROIT — For generations, driver's licenses have been tickets to freedom for America's 16-year-olds, prompting many to line up at motor vehicle offices the day they were eligible to apply.

No longer. In the last decade, the proportion of 16-year-olds nationwide who hold driver's licenses has dropped from nearly half to less than one-third, according to statistics from the Federal Highway Administration.

Reasons vary, including tighter state laws governing when teenagers can drive, higher insurance costs and a shift from school-run driver education to expensive private driving academies.

To that mix, experts also add parents who are willing to chauffeur their children to activities, and pastimes like surfing the Web that keep them indoors and glued to computers.

Jaelyn Frederick, 17, of suburban Detroit, is a year past the age when she could get a Michigan license. She said she planned to apply for one eventually, but sees no rush.

"Oh, I guess I just haven't done it yet, you know?" said Jaelyn, a senior at Ferndale High School, in Ferndale, Mich.

"I get rides and stuff, so I'm not worried about it. I'll get around to it, maybe this summer sometime."

Until she does, she has company. The national rate of licensed 16-year-olds dropped to 29.8 percent in 2006 from 43.8 percent in 1998, according to the Federal Highway Administration.

The falling rate of teenage drivers is perplexing to Michael T. Marsden, an expert on car culture and dean of St. Norbert College in De Pere, Wis.

"It's a big change in a major American ritual of driving as early as possible," Mr. Marsden said.

The way students learn has undergone a major change, too. Twenty-five years ago most teenagers took driver's education in their local schools. But the number of school systems offering the program has plummeted to about 20 percent today, from 90 percent in the 1980s, said Allen R. Robinson, chief executive of the American Driver and Traffic Safety Education Association, which represents high school and commercial driver education instructors.

"High schools are out of the business because of the cost," said Henning Mortensen, owner of Bond Driving School in Sacramento.

Commercial driving academies have stepped in to fill the gap. For example, in Louisiana, the number of private schools has grown to about 60 this year, from just two in 1993, said Sheila Vernado, a spokeswoman for the Driving School Association of the Americas, which represents owners of commercial driving agencies.

In contrast to high schools, which offered driver's education as a regular class or for a modest fee during the summer, driving schools charge higher rates. Mr. Mortensen, who has been in business since 1990, said his average program runs about \$400.

Insurance costs are also rising. Where parents used to be able to add their young drivers to their policies for a nominal charge, it now costs 80 percent to 100 percent more to add a 16-year-old to a family's auto policy, said Raleigh Floyd, a spokesman for the [Allstate Corporation](#) in Northbrook, Ill. The highest rate is charged if the teenager owns a vehicle, he said.

Over all, teenage drivers have the highest crash risk of any group. Car accidents account for one-third of all deaths of 16- to 18-year-olds, according to the [National Highway Traffic Safety Administration](#).

Graduated driver-licensing laws, which delay awarding a full license until a teenager spends time with a parent or driving under certain conditions, are also keeping down the number of 16-year-olds on the road, said Frederik R. Mottola, executive director of the National Institute for Driver Behavior, which promotes driver education.

"Now people are learning that the more repetition you can give the teens, the better," Mr. Mottola said.

These laws, in existence for about a decade, have helped reduce the number of fatal crashes involving 16-year-old drivers by about 11 percent, according to a 2006 study by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. That average increases to 20 percent for states with the strictest laws.

Forty-nine states allow young drivers to obtain restricted licenses before, on or within a few months of their 16th birthday. (The age for a restricted license is as low as 14 in some states.) New Jersey requires a driver to be 17 years old.

Sweeping changes to teenage driving laws in Illinois ranked the state among the nation's most restrictive, said Melissa Savage, policy analyst for the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The Illinois laws, in effect since January, set a weekend driving curfew of 11 p.m. (10 p.m. on weeknights) for drivers up to 17 years old. They also tripled the length of a learner's permit from 3 to 9 months and increased the number of training hours behind the wheel to 6 hours from 1 hour of actual driving time. (Previously, computer simulation could substitute for the other five hours.)

In Delaware, teenagers not fully licensed may not drive between 10 p.m. and 6 a.m.

Indeed, the fatal crash rate for 16-year-olds driving at night is twice as high as it is during the day, according to the [National Transportation Safety Board](#).

At the other end of the spectrum are states like North Dakota, which allows a learner's permit at 14 and has no minimum supervised-driving requirements, according to the [Insurance Institute for Highway Safety](#),

which evaluates graduated licensing laws.

Beyond the tighter regulations, some parents are just not encouraging lessons, said Naomi Drew, author of "Peaceful Parents, Peaceful Kids," which studied family lifestyles.

"The roads are angrier these days," she said. "Parents are worried for their children's safety."

One such parent is Teresa Sheffer, of Bethlehem, Ga. Her daughter, Kelsey, has had a permit for nearly two years, but is not yet fully licensed because of her mother's safety concerns.

Ms. Sheffer, a pediatric nurse, even paid a police officer to drive with Kelsey to previous accident sites and graphically explain what had happened.

"This is in hope of instilling an element of fear," Ms. Sheffer said. "Cars are lethal weapons, and I want to make sure she has the experience she needs, and knows what can happen when you don't pay attention."

Kelsey, who will turn 17 in June, said she had lost the motivation to pursue her full license. For now, her mother is happy to shuttle her to swimming and cheerleader practice.

"I'm disappointed, but if I had my license mom probably wouldn't let me drive anyway," Kelsey said. "But even if I did, I'd have to drive our minivan." That prospect, she said, "is just totally not cool."

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