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Commentary

Adolescent Driver Testing During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Johnathon P. Ehsani, Ph.D., M.P.H. *

Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Baltimore, Maryland

Passing a driving test is no longer required for adolescents to obtain a driver's license in a number of U.S. states, including Georgia, Wisconsin, and Texas, owing to the COVID-19 pandemic [1]. Adolescents in these states who have held a learner permit and completed the hours of supervised practice driving required by Graduated Driver Licensing laws are eligible to obtain a license to drive independently with the consent of their parent or guardian. Licensing agencies appear to have taken this extraordinary step to minimize the risks of COVID-19 transmission. In doing so, they have traded one public health threat for another. Rather than stop testing, states could take effective precautions to minimize transmission of COVID-19 and simultaneously reduce the risks posed to adolescents from motor vehicle crashes.

To appreciate the scale of the problem, it is worth noting that crashes are the leading cause of death for adolescents in the United States. In 2018, the latest year for which data are available, 3,070 adolescents aged 15–19 years were killed in crashes [2]. This age group is overrepresented in crash deaths, making up 6.4% of the overall U.S. population [3], but was involved in 12.8% of fatal crashes in 2017 [4]. Among newly licensed adolescents, approximately one third crash in the first year of driving [5]. Crashes pose a danger to the adolescents who are driving, their passengers (who tend to be young people), and all other road users (who are typically adults). Inexperience and poor judgment, rather than deliberate risk taking, are widely recognized as the cause of adolescent drivers' elevated crash risk [6].

The driving test represents an important symbolic step in the process of becoming a driver. The safety benefit of the driving test comes primarily from the perceived seriousness of the event and the importance that this confers to the right to drive on public roads, rather than from its ability to effectively screen unsafe drivers [7]. This public perception may be eroded if the driving test is eliminated, and this could be interpreted by some as a "free pass"

to independent licensure. Rather than suspending the test altogether, licensing agencies should adopt appropriate precautions to minimize the risk of transmission of COVID-19. These include ensuring sufficient ventilation within the vehicle either by opening the windows or allowing for air intake from outside [8]. Both the examiner and adolescent should wear masks and gloves, and high contact surfaces within the vehicle should be sanitized before and after the test. Another configuration could be to modify the test so that it takes place on a closed track where the examiner remains outside of the vehicle and instructs the adolescent to complete a series of driving maneuvers, as Maryland has carried out [9].

For parents and guardians of adolescents, the suspension of the driving test raises challenging questions. In the absence of any guidance, they have been placed in the position of assessing their adolescent's readiness to drive. States that have suspended the driving test have set the only requirement for advancing to independent licensure as a parent or guardian endorsing the fact that the adolescent has completed the holding period for the learner permit and required hours of practice driving. These are widely recognized as minimum requirements, rather than the threshold that confers a safety benefit [5]. While some parents might demand that their adolescents complete more rigorous practice than the minimum requirements, others may understandably accept the state's guidance as being sufficient.

At a population level, adolescent drivers' risk of crashing is a function of their experience and exposure. If a considerable amount of practice driving was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic when driving patterns were atypical, then adolescents are likely to have accumulated experience in a driving environment that may not have prepared them sufficiently for real world driving. In this light, the on-road driving test takes on increased significance as a means of establishing expectations for safe driving. Although the long-term impacts of the pandemic on driving are not yet known, emerging trends suggest that the fear of COVID-19 infection while using shared modes of transportation (e.g., trains or buses) may lead to an increased reliance on personal vehicles for those who can afford it [10] and consequently increased risk exposure for many adolescents. Countervailing trends related to the pandemic such as online education and extended stay-at-home orders may reduce the need for mobility in general, but reports to date indicate that driving risk may be increasing rather than decreasing [11].

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* Address correspondence to: Johnathon P. Ehsani, Ph.D., M.P.H., Department of Health Policy and Management, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, 624 N. Broadway, Hampton House 555, Baltimore MD, 21205.

E-mail address: johnathon.ehsani@jhu.edu.

Regardless, greater driving exposure among adolescents will translate to an increase in crashes in this population, meaning that safety interventions need to be enhanced, rather than relaxed.

The risks to adolescents posed by motor vehicle crashes are firmly established. The on-road driving test plays an important role in setting safety expectations. With appropriate precautions to minimize the transmission of COVID-19, states could resume on-road testing while avoiding an experience that would place adolescents and examiners at extraordinary risk of infection. While the COVID-19 era has upended many traditions in education, training, and testing in many sectors, certain critical steps in the process should not be replaced. Accumulated experience is demonstrating that the risks of COVID-19 transmission can be effectively managed. The threats of a pandemic need not require compromises in adolescent driver safety.

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