Driving Forces

Fewer young, but more elderly, have driver's licenses

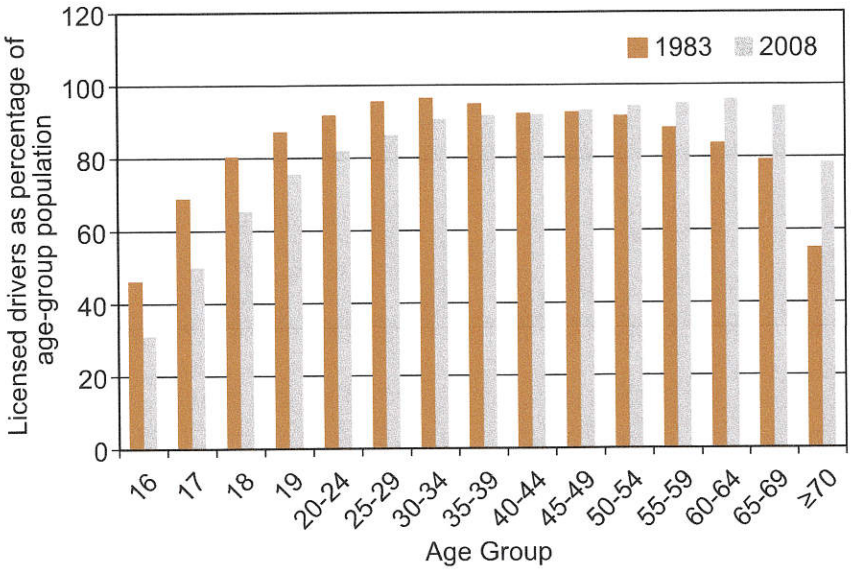
The convenience of electronic communication may be partly to blame. Or the high cost of buying and maintaining a vehicle. Whatever the reason, UMTRI research has recently shown that fewer young people today are getting driver's licenses than their counterparts in the early 1980s.

In a new study in the journal *Traffic Injury Prevention,* UMTRI research professor Michael Sivak and colleague Brandon Schoettle examined changes in the United States from 1983 to 2008 in the percentage of persons with driver's licenses as a function of age.

They found that a third of all licensed drivers in the United States in 1983 were under age thirty. Today, only about 22 percent of drivers are twentysomethings or teenagers. Further, more than half of all drivers in 1983 were under age forty, but today that number has fallen to less than 40 percent.

"It is possible that the availability of virtual contact through electronic means reduces the need for actual contact among young people," said Sivak. "Furthermore, some young people feel that driving interferes with texting and other electronic communication."

"Also of importance," Sivak added, "is the fact that younger people are moving in increasing numbers to large cities with reasonable public transportation, such as New York and San Francisco. Finally, younger people are on the forefront of concern for the environment."



SIVAK AND SCHOETTLE (2011); BASED ON DATA PUBLISHED IN *TRAFFIC INJURY PREVENTION, VOL. 12, PP. 588-592.*

Sivak and Schoettle found that young people not only account for a lower percentage of today's total licensed drivers, but that young drivers comprise a smaller portion of their age group, relative to the same figures from 1983. *(See graph above.)*

About 87 percent of nineteen-year-olds in 1983 had their licenses, but twenty-five years later, that percentage had dropped to about 75 percent. Other teen driving groups have also declined: eighteen-year-olds fell from 80 percent in 1983 to 65 percent in 2008, seventeen-year-olds decreased from 69 percent to 50 percent, and sixteen-year-olds slipped from 46 percent to 31 percent.

Drivers in their twenties and thirties also saw their ranks fall as a percentage of their age group population—down nearly 10 percentage points for twentysomethings and down about 5 percentage points for the thirtysomethings.

Research professor Ray Bingham, who heads UMTRI's Young Driver Behavior and Injury Prevention Group, says that he hasn't noticed a change in the importance of driving to teens, but cost can be a significant obstacle.

"What I have heard a lot is that the cost of getting licensed, purchasing, insuring, maintaining and fueling a car has become an impediment to use of a car. Prices have increased a fair bit since the mid 1980s for all facets of car ownership and operation," said Bingham. "Cost pushes people to seek out transportation alternatives."

Older People Still Driving

On the other hand, licensed drivers among older age groups (those over forty) have increased their numbers, as both a percentage of their population and as a percentage of total licensed drivers.

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Sivak and Schoettle found that in 2008, those seventy and older comprised the largest group of drivers on the road—more than 10 percent—slightly higher than those in their forties or fifties. Furthermore, licensed drivers as a percentage of their age group population have risen for all groups over age forty-five since 1983. *(See graph on page 1.)* In 1983, between 84 percent and 88 percent of people in their late fifties and early sixties had a driver's license. Now those percentages are in the 95-percent range. The change is even more pronounced for seniors. Today, about 94 percent of those age sixty-five to sixty-nine and 78 percent of those seventy and older have their licenses, up from 79 percent and 55 percent, respectively, in 1983.

The aging of the U.S. population is partly at work, says UMTRI research scientist David W. Eby, head of the Michigan Center for Advancing Safe Transportation throughout the Lifespan (M-CASTL). The decline in infant mortality, increasing lifespans, and baby boomers aging into older adulthood are three significant factors. The first baby boomers turned sixty-five this year, and all baby boomers will be sixty-five or older in the next twenty years.

Eby confirms that older adults of today are more likely to hold a driver's license than the older adult of a decade ago. According to Eby, this trend is largely due to older women being more likely to obtain and hold a driver's license in old age. Older women's rates of licensure are approaching that of older men. However, Eby points out, having a license does not necessarily mean that a person is driving. Maintaining safe mobility for older adults will continue to be a challenging societal issue for the next several decades.

"The solutions to this challenge will require a multidisciplinary, system-wide approach that includes improvements in vehicle and roadway design; licensing and enforcement policy; community mobility options; education and awareness; and care giving practices," said Eby.

Future of Transportation

A combination of factors is at work, agrees Sue Zielinski, director of Sustainable Mobility and Accessibility Research and Transformation (SMART), who added that the evolution of who is and who isn't obtaining and holding a driver's license is an indicator, not a cause of how society and transportation are changing.

Mounting evidence points to the evolution of more sophisticated, multimode transportation systems, said Zielinski. These systems can include personal cars but also take advantage of emerging technological and social innovations that help create transportation portfolios that are connected, sustainable, and appealing.

In light of rapid urbanization and complex demographic, economic, and cultural shifts, licensing trends are an important indicator that transportation systems of the future will need to evolve to meet the diverse needs and preferences of a broad range of people, from young to old. RR

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