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More teens are choosing to wait to get driver's licenses

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By Donna St. George
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The quest to get a driver's license at 16 -- long an American rite of passage -- is on the wane among the digital generation, which no longer sees the family car as the end-all of social life.

The holdouts include Kat Velkoff, who turned 17 in Chantilly without a license. Focused on tough classes, the debate team, dance and color guard, she turned 18 without taking the wheel. Then 19.

"It just wasn't a priority," said Velkoff, who got her license last year at 20. "It was just never the next thing that needed to get done in my life."

[Federal data released Friday](#) underscore a striking national shift: 30.7 percent of 16-year-olds got their licenses in 2008, compared with 44.7 percent in 1988. The difference is even sharper in Virginia and Maryland, state figures show. Numbers from the District, which go back to 2003, show a decline in the past two years.

"Driving is real important to a lot of the kids in the culture, but it is not the central focus like it was 25 years ago," said Tom Pecoraro, owner of I Drive Smart, a Washington area drivers' education program, who added that plenty of his students are older teens. "They have so many other things to do now," he said, and, with years of being shuttled to sports, lessons and play dates, "kids are used to being driven."

A generation consumed by Facebook and text-messaging, by Xbox Live and smartphones, no longer needs to climb into a car to connect with friends. And although many teens are still eager to drive, new laws make getting a license far more time-consuming, requiring as many as 60 supervised driving practice hours with an adult.

Rob Foss, director of the [Center for the Study of Young Drivers](#) at the University of North Carolina, and others suggest that these "graduated" state licensing systems -- which have created new requirements for learner's permits, supervised practice hours, night driving and passengers in the car -- are responsible for much of the decline in the number of licensed 16-year-olds. At the same time, drivers' education has been cut back in some public schools, so families must scrounge up money -- often \$300 to \$600 -- for private driving schools.

Then there is car insurance and gas, expenses that make driving too costly for some families and a stretch for others.

"In this economy, if my daughter were to drive, just the insurance would be \$1,200 a year or more, and that's a lot of money," said Elizabeth Walker, the mother of a reluctant driver in Rockville.

Leaving it to parents

There have always been differences between the city and suburban mind-set when it comes to driving, because cities have more public transportation. In suburban and rural areas, it can be trickier to be a later-teen driver.

Not that this has stopped Wylie Conlon, 17.

The senior at Montgomery Blair High School in Silver Spring has a learner's permit, but the required 60 hours of practice driving toward a driver's license have taken a back seat to his Advanced Placement classes, the rowing team, the literary magazine and Web design projects. "It's hard to spend all that time on driving when I can get places without it," he said.

Conlon said this as his mother, Eva Sullivan Conlon, was driving him to the store to buy supplies for a school project; she ends up taking him places a few times a week. But he also finds his own way, boarding two buses and a train to see his girlfriend in Rockville, for example. In his circle, he adds, "most of my friends don't have driver's licenses, and the few who do end up giving rides to the rest of us."

Natalie Perez-Duel, a 16-year-old junior at Albert Einstein High School in Kensington, has yet to take driving classes and does not know when she will. "It's one more thing to study for, and it's just a hassle," said Perez-Duel, who is already squeezing in AP and International Baccalaureate classes, dance, poms and a school play.

She does not mind rides from her parents. "They have always driven me, and they still do, so it's not that weird," she said.

For parents, the license lag brings mixed reaction. Some are relieved; some mystified.

Barry Johnson, 52, who grew up in Silver Spring, remembers the glory of turning 16 and heading to the Department of Motor Vehicles "on the day you were eligible."

"Not only did all of my friends have licenses," he said, "but most of us worked and had cars by the time we graduated high school." He and his friends worked on their cars in the evening, and on weekends they went out driving -- a mark of "freedom, independence, adulthood," he said.

Now a father of two, Johnson notes that his college-age children still don't have licenses. "Neither one has risen to the occasion," he said. "Both have decided that Washington, D.C., is a great place to use their 'BMW' -- bus, Metro, walk."

Susan Apter, 48, of Rockville said her eldest daughter delayed so long that Apter finally insisted that she get licensed when she was a senior. "I took the initiative to schedule the test, helicopter parent that I am," she joked. By contrast, Apter's 15-year-old son knows the precise day in May when he can get his permit.

Plenty of parents don't want their children driving at 16, given the congestion and peril of the Washington area's roads and the fact that car crashes are the leading cause of teen deaths.

Cindy Wei, 55, of Herndon was thankful that her daughter was in no hurry to get her license. "I wanted her safe as long as possible," Wei said. "If it means I have to give up watching TV for 15 minutes so she can get a ride across town, I'm happy to do it."

A rite of passage

But waiting too long also has its drawbacks. Teens might get the best chance at supervised practice, some parents and experts say, before they head off to college, the military or a job.

"Learning to drive is a fundamental part of adolescence," said psychologist Joseph Allen of the University of Virginia. "It gives teens a major responsibility they have to handle, and it also gives them the chance to move about on their own, to function independently of their families."

It has become harder for teens to grow up, Allen says in a recent book, "Escaping the Endless Adolescence," because parents too often try to eliminate risks and obstacles rather than teaching teens to manage them safely. "Parents are scared to death about their teens driving," he said. "But they won't grow up if we just lock them in a room to keep them safe."

Jack Gibala, 60, a father of three in Rockville, said he and his wife tackled the driving question one child at a time. Their daughter drove at 16. But their two sons had to wait until 18 or 19 because they were less mature. "We just felt it was crazy to put them behind the wheel of a two-ton killing machine," he said.

The downside: "It's a pain . . . hauling these kids around when they are 17 and 18 years old." But he said he is glad he did.

Jeanne Kahn, 49, a mother of two, did some extra driving, too, until her eldest son got his license at 18. But many days, he was content at home in North Potomac, using the computer, playing video games or watching sports on TV. "It may be they feel more entertained at home than my generation did," Kahn said.

Technology has clearly altered the social world for 16-year-olds.

Michelle Wei, 19, who got her license as a senior, was happy to walk to school and carpool to soccer games. Most of her friends lived within a few blocks. "If I couldn't get a ride to see my friend who lives a town over, I could talk on IM," she said. "Or Skype." The digital world, she said, "made it very easy not to drive."

And not driving can be a good thing in some families.

As for Kat Velkoff, who got her license at 20, she and her mother spent 30 minutes together every school day in the family Prius, as they went from their Chantilly home to Velkoff's IB high school program in Reston. "We could talk about everything, and we got to share music with each other," she said. "My mom and I became really close."

Database editor Dan Keating contributed to this report.

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