

DRIVER LICENSE RENEWAL ISSUES AND CONCERNS

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ABSTRACT: Periodic renewal of driver licenses is an integral part of the driver licensing procedures for most states, including Kentucky. Renewal of driver licenses is usually required every four years, and many states conduct vision tests before granting renewal. Few states require additional testing, while several states, including Kentucky, have no vision or any other examinations at renewal. Past research has shown a relationship between crashes and driving records. Thus, it was considered important to develop mechanisms to identify potential problem drivers and to systematically review current practices regarding license renewal and retesting. Additional concerns included the increasing percentage of elderly drivers and their deterioration of vision due to aging.

There is a universal agreement among researchers that vision plays a significant role in driving performance, that there are age-related visual changes, and that drivers over age 75 have proportionally higher crash rates than most younger age groups of drivers. However, there is no established standard for vision screening policies. The use of low-contrast charts may improve the effectiveness of vision tests. Age-based road tests are not considered as a practical means to identify drivers with deficiencies, and they would unnecessarily burden the license renewal process. However, using road tests as an additional means of evaluating select individuals, such as those failing vision tests or those referred by a physician or family member, could significantly improve the identification of deficient drivers.

The work completed here indicates that safety gains might be achieved by implementing additional procedures for older drivers. The first step might be to require that drivers over 75 renew their driver license every 2 years. A second step would be to use vision screening tests that include a set of medical questions to be given at license renewal for older drivers. As noted earlier, road testing for renewal does not reduce crash rates nor assist in identifying at-risk drivers, and thus is not considered a good initiative. However, allowing renewal examiners the discretion to require road testing as deemed necessary is recommended as a third step.

Despite the considerable amount of existing knowledge about the physiological changes of older persons and the impact of these changes on driving, further research is needed. Such research should seek to design and evaluate license renewal programs that would provide older persons with a fair assessment of their driving abilities.