

Teens Are in No Rush to Drive

As modes of socializing change, digital generation delays rite of passage

By Donna St. George
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WASHINGTON — 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.

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.

"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,

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Rob Foss, director of the Center for the Study of Young Drivers, 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.

But waiting too long also has its drawbacks. "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."