

Teen driving fatalities nationwide appear to be climbing significantly again after a long period of declining deaths among 16- and 17-year-old novices, according to a report issued Tuesday by the Governors' Highway Safety Association.

But New Jersey's teen death rate has declined.

Based on preliminary data from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the report showed one driver in this age group was killed on a Garden State road in the first half of 2012, compared to two in 2011. But nationwide, 38 more deaths were reported — a 19 percent jump to 240 teen fatalities and much higher than NHTSA projections placing the overall increase in traffic deaths for the period at 8 percent.

"If final ... data follows this trend, then 2012 would be the second year in a row of increases ... following eight years of decline," the governors group said in a statement.

Specifically, deaths of 16-year-old drivers jumped 24 percent, to 107, and fatalities among 17-year-olds rose 15 percent, to 133. Twenty-five states reported increases, 17 showed declines and eight states and Washington, D.C., remained the same.

The governors group attributed the overall jump to the partial economic recovery that may put more teens on the road and the fact that "fewer states have been strengthening their graduated driver license systems" that include curfews and other restrictions on novice driving behavior in the first year or two of licensure.

New Jersey is the only state that requires novices to stick a red tag on their bumpers for at least one year to enable police to easily recognize inexperienced drivers when they violate GDL restrictions.

"Research shows strong GDL programs [are] the reason why states in the past have made significant gains in reducing teen driver and passenger fatalities and injuries," said GHSA consultant Pam Fischer, the head of a New Jersey teen driving safety coalition and former director of the state Division of Highway Traffic Safety.

New Jersey was one of the early states to accept GDL reform. Recent changes added the red tag, moved the curfew to 11 p.m., and reduced the number of teen passengers a novice may drive to one, unless an older licensee is in the car.

Fischer attributed past reductions in teen road deaths partly to the GDL. For 2012, a full year of preliminary New Jersey State Police fatality figures shows 38 driver and passenger deaths in the 16-to-20-year-old category attributable to drivers in this age group. That figure compares favorably with 2011's, when fatalities for this group reached 44. But that number marked a 33 percent increase compared to 33 deaths in 2010.