



The characteristics of young pre-licensed drivers: Evidence from the New Zealand Drivers Study

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The aim of this study was to identify demographic and behavioural factors associated with pre-licensed driving.

Method: A cohort comprising 3526 newly licensed drivers aged 15–24 years old from throughout New Zealand completed a questionnaire which sought information on pre-licensed driving behaviour and factors thought to be related to this.

Results: Almost half of the participants had driven on-road prior to passing their learner license theory test; 14% had driven more than 20 times; and 7.5% had driven more than 200 km. Multivariate logistic regression showed the results differed depending on the outcome examined. In general pre-licensed driving was significantly higher among males, among Māori, those living in a rural area, and those living in an area of high deprivation. Furthermore, those who drove pre-licensed were more likely to engage in other risky behaviours such as hazardous drinking and cannabis use, and have medium to high scores for sensation seeking and aggression/hostility.

Conclusion: The young people who were pre-licensed drivers displayed a range of demographic and behavioural characteristics that indicate they may be at higher crash risk than their peers who did not drive before licensing. Identifying those who drive before licensing and targeting road safety interventions towards this group may help reduce the high crash risk among novice drivers.

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1. Introduction

In 2008, over 30% of all road deaths in New Zealand were in the 15–24 year age range (Ministry of Transport, 2009). The fatality rate per 100,000 population for this age group is higher than almost all of the other countries that contribute to the International Road Traffic and Accident Database (Ministry of Transport, 2009). It is therefore important that reasons for the high rate in New Zealand are investigated. One factor which has been shown to be related to increased crash involvement is unlicensed driving (Blows et al., 2005; DeYoung et al., 1997).

Unlicensed drivers have been shown to engage more frequently in risky driving behaviours, such as speeding, drink driving, and running red lights (Blows et al., 2005; Kim and Kim, 2003), and less often in protective behaviours, such as wearing a seatbelt (Elliott et al., 2010). Not surprisingly, research has also found unlicensed drivers have a higher crash risk than licensed drivers, with

some studies putting this increased risk as high as 11 times that of licensed drivers (Blows et al., 2005).

The term “unlicensed drivers”, however, can be confusing as it may include several different categories of driver, such as drivers whose license has been suspended or disqualified, drivers with the incorrect type of license, or drivers who have never been licensed. It is the never-licensed drivers that are of interest for the present study, and in particular young people (aged 15–24 years) who have driven on-road before they gained a license. We prefer to call these drivers pre-licensed drivers. At present in New Zealand,¹ as part of the graduated driver licensing system, driver licensing can commence at 15 years of age by passing a learner license theory test (New Zealand Transport Agency, 2010). Holding a learner license allows on-road driving, providing a fully licensed supervisor is present. On-road driving before passing the learner license theory test is illegal, even if supervised by a licensed driver.

Despite the many compelling reasons to conduct research in this area, there has been surprisingly few studies on pre-licensed drivers (Hasselberg and Laflamme, 2009), with one obvious reason

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¹ As of 1st August 2011 the minimum license age increased to 16 years.