

SUBMISSION ON YOUNG DRIVER SAFETY BY THE AUSTRALASIAN COLLEGE OF ROAD SAFETY

Preamble

Late last year the NSW Government released a discussion paper on 'Young Driver Safety', calling for submissions from the public. The discussion paper is at www.youngdrivers.com.au.

The Australasian College of Road Safety prepared this submission in response to the discussion paper.

INTRODUCTION

This submission responds to the invitation by Minister for Roads Carl Scully for public comment on the discussion paper announced in November 2004 and published by the NSW Roads & Traffic Authority at www.youngdrivers.com.au.

The Australasian College of Road Safety has a strong interest in young driver safety issues. The College has published a policy statement on young drivers, to be found on its web site www.acrs.org.au and attached to this submission. In 1997 ACRS partnered with the Staysafe Committee of the NSW Parliament in a conference on young drivers⁽¹⁾. In 2002 ACRS joined with the Queensland Parliament's Travelsafe Committee for a similar conference⁽²⁾. Representatives of the College have presented conference papers and published papers in the College's journal *Roadwise* and other journals on young driver safety issues.

This submission follows the format of the Options Paper and treats the issues in the same order.

OPTIONS CATEGORY 1 – EXPERIENCE, TRAINING AND AGE

POSSIBLE INITIATIVE

Increase the mandatory period of supervised driving for Learner drivers from 50 hours to 100 hours.

Comment: ACRS strongly supports this initiative. There is a considerable body of research to show that some of the greatest deficiencies in novice drivers are the perceptual, cognitive and judgemental skills that allow them to perceive, understand and make correct judgments about the road environment (see for example Mayhew and Simpson⁽³⁾). Further there is as yet no known way of augmenting those skills other than by gaining on-road experience. That experience should be gained through graduated practice that proceeds, as the learner gains experience and confidence, from off-road practice under low risk conditions through to progressively more demanding conditions, until by the time the learner is ready to undertake the DART he or she should ideally not have anything new to experience after gaining the Provisional licence.

This approach (and also driving practice amounting to about 100 hours in a year) was advocated by the Australian College of Road Safety as long ago as 1996, in a booklet prepared for parents and carers of young drivers (*Surviving your teenager's learner's*

permit⁽⁴⁾). The same approach is used in the workshops funded by the RTA for parents of learner drivers.

Increasing the amount of pre-DART practice is one of the single most effective things that can be done to improve the safety of the newly licensed driver. Some of the reasons why this is so necessary are set out in Smith, 2002⁽⁵⁾.

Recommendation: Increase the minimum amount of practice from 50 to 100 hours.

POSSIBLE INITIATIVE

Increase the minimum tenure period for a learner licence from six to twelve months for drivers under 25, and extend the validity of the learner licence from three to five years.

Comment: (a) **Increasing the learner permit tenure** goes hand in hand with increasing the minimum number of hours of driving practice. In practical terms it would be difficult to gain 100 hours of practice in much under twelve months under most normal conditions, given that 100 hours amounts to around two hours per week. In their review of graduated licensing Senserrick and Whelan⁽⁶⁾ report somewhat mixed outcomes for learner permit period measures: *increasing the minimum learner period* showed clear association with crash reductions, while *mandating a minimum learner period* had theoretical support but its merits had not been fully evaluated, and results were inconclusive, limited or unknown for *allowing lengthy learner permit periods with no renewal fees to discourage early licensure*.

Logically, the prior and more important issue is gaining sufficient practice (see previous item). The learner permit tenure is a secondary issue once the system requires so much practice that a reasonably significant and sustained effort is required to fit the required amount of practice into the minimum period. Given a mandatory minimum amount of driving practice, the minimum learner period is important only insofar as it sends a message that authorities are serious about the need for extensive pre-licence practice.

(b) **Extending the validity of the learner licence from three to five years.** It is not clear what benefits might be gained by this measure. It needs to be considered in the light of information on the periods for which learners presently hold their learner permit, linked with information on the amount of practice reported in log books. If it is demonstrated that a significant proportion are taking three years or close to three years to obtain the minimum amount of practice, then extending the length of time for which the learner permit is valid may have some value if the minimum amount of practice is increased from 50 to 100 hours. If statistics show that learners are holding their permits for a much shorter period of time and gaining the required amount of practice, then there is probably no good reason to extend the validity of the learner permit. It is suspected that few young people would be willing to stay on their learner permits for an extended period of time, since the object for many is to obtain a driver's licence and the independence that brings as early as possible.

One issue that needs to be considered is the effect on driving practice of an extended learner permit period. Learned skills may be extinguished if not practised. Significantly extending the learner permit may be counterproductive if a learner made no attempt to gain regular practice and sought only to get the minimum required practice. Five years would dilute the practice effect and reduce its effectiveness.

Recommendation: Extending the learner permit period from six to twelve months should only be contemplated if the minimum amount of practice is extended from 50 to 100 hours, and then only to maintain logical consistency.

Extending the validity of the learner licence from three to five years is not recommended unless statistics on the period for which learner licences are currently held, coupled with statistics on the amount of practice learners are getting, indicate that extending the validity of the learner licence would be of value.

POSSIBLE INITIATIVE

Increase the provisional licence age to 18 years

Comment: Logically, raising the provisional licence age reduces exposure at a very vulnerable stage. Senserrick and Whelan report theoretical support for raising the licensing age to extend the learner period. However, careful consideration must be given to introducing a measure that will be unpopular and may disadvantage some young people by preventing them from holding jobs, if also extending the minimum learner permit tenure from six to twelve months and increasing the minimum amount of practice from 50 to 100 hours (measures that are more important and potentially more effective). Either of these measures will very likely have the effect of raising the minimum licensing age to something over 17 years while at the same time producing drivers who are better prepared.

Without good supporting evidence it is difficult to say whether raising the licensing age to 18 years would produce more mature novice drivers.

While not aware of any evidence on the matter, ACRS considers that making the minimum licensing age the same as the legal drinking age should be avoided. Doing so would bring together two significant ‘threshold’ experiences in young persons’ lives, with the attendant risk factors. The argument that ‘this might not be a major issue as research indicates that significant numbers of young people drink before turning 18’ is not an appropriate reason for doing so. Just because it happens does not mean structures should be built to reflect it.

Recommendation: The present minimum licensing age of 17 years should be retained.

POSSIBLE INITIATIVE

Further develop formal driver training by piloting a novice driver program.

Comment: ACRS recognises that there remains debate about how effective novice driver education programs are in improving safety. Crash-based evaluations are lacking. Nevertheless there are theoretical grounds in favour of such training. There are no known indications that programs of the type being developed are harmful in terms of crash outcomes. ACRS supports the conduct of the trial program and NSW participation in it, but recommends strongly that it should be thoroughly evaluated over an extended period. Care should be taken to avoid any suggestion that formal driver training programs are in any way a substitute for driving practice.

Recommendation: ACRS supports the trial of the novice driver coaching program, and considers it essential that it be subjected to a thorough scientific evaluation.

POSSIBLE INITIATIVE

Provide an increased role for secondary schools in driver training by piloting new driver education programs in NSW high schools

Comment: Rightly focussed, programs of the kind described in the discussion paper to increase understanding of risk factors, peer influences and the like may have some benefit. Care should be taken to ensure however that such programs do not focus only on negative factors, but also suggest strategies to avoid or assertively manage peer pressure and other risky situations. Standardising is probably less important than providing guidelines so that programs that might be developed locally have the right focus and avoid undesirable features.

ACRS also considers that programs for parents and carers to assist them helping young people to learn safe driving should be supported.

Recommendation: ACRS supports piloting of new education programs, and considers that they should be subjected to thorough scientific evaluation.

POSSIBLE INITIATIVE

Further develop the existing Driving Ability Road Test to include more comprehensive performance checks, with a primary focus on hazard perception and safe driving practices

Comment: There is value in reviewing the DART to determine whether it is appropriate and whether it adequately covers the cognitive, judgemental and hazard perception skills necessary for safe driving. Any changes proposed for the DART should be thoroughly evaluated and assessed before being introduced in a revised DART.

Recommendation: ACRS considers that any proposals for changes to the DART should be thoroughly evaluated before changes to DART are contemplated.

OPTIONS CATEGORY 2 – VEHICLE AND LICENCE RESTRICTIONS

POSSIBLE INITIATIVE

Introduce a limit of no more than one passenger for P1 drivers aged under 26

Comment: This measure is very unpopular with both young people and their parents, and the fact that it is so unpopular means that enforcement is difficult. However it should not be considered that the restriction has no benefit because it is not applied totally with full compliance. Senserrick and Whelan⁽⁶⁾ noted that in the US some restrictions had substantial benefits even when compliance was relatively low.

We should not be too quick to point out the benefit in various US states and New Zealand and say that measures that have proved to be effective there should be introduced here. A licensing age of 15 or 16 in the jurisdictions reviewed by Senserrick and Whelan compared with 17 or more makes a very large difference in terms of what parents can demand of their children, except perhaps in the limited circumstance of when the parent's car is being used.

It might be worth considering that the greatest benefit in passenger restrictions is their symbolism and the fact that their existence reinforces parental authority and, often, young people's own preferences. The existence of a rule might give some a valid excuse that helps them resist pressures to get into risky situations. Senserrick and Whelan noted that in the US official enforcement is seen as of secondary importance to parental control and self-enforcement. Again, while the US experience has to be seen in the context of lower licensing ages the comment still has some force in Australia.

It may be necessary to introduce a passenger restriction in such a way as to have benefit for the most vulnerable at the most vulnerable period, and in turn accept some lesser benefit in the interests of obtaining better compliance. It is worth returning to first principles. Drummond⁽⁷⁾ pointed out that crash risk with passengers aboard was greatest at night (see Smith⁽⁸⁾). Regan and Mitsopoulos⁽⁹⁾ found that for young male drivers, the risk was greatest when the passengers were other young males.

Therefore, passenger restrictions are likely to have the greatest acceptance, compliance and therefore effect if they are introduced for circumstances and periods when young drivers are most vulnerable and relaxed under conditions where the crash risk is lower. A procedure like this would reinforce the point that there are circumstances with very high crash risk, and that these are being targeted. One might therefore develop a scheme something like:

- Restrictions to apply only for the duration of the P1 intermediate licence
- Ban on carrying more than one peer passenger for the first six months of P1 unless accompanied by a fully licensed driver over 25 years
- Ban on carrying more than one peer passenger at night (say, midnight-5am) for the duration of P1 unless accompanied by a fully licensed driver over 25 years.

Research in progress (Smith and Graham⁽¹⁰⁾) suggests that the introduction of restrictions would need to be accompanied by extensive public education that points out the risks, that makes strongly the point that restrictions are not a punishment inflicted on all for the sins of a few, and that the restrictions directly target high crash risk conditions. If a component of such education is also aimed at parents so that they too are aware of the risks, they may be more willing to support the restrictions and to adopt safety measures such as accompanying their teenager or ferry their children around than they otherwise would.

The RTA discussion paper noted that restrictions need to be weighed against the social equity issues of mobility and access. This is no small issue. Whether viable alternatives are available must be considered. Public transport even when available is often not an option because of personal security concerns, especially for young women. Outside Sydney there is often no alternative to the private car.

Recommendation: RTA should consider a passenger restriction that covers young drivers in their most vulnerable periods and the most crash risky circumstances. Should be preceded and accompanied by extensive and carefully targeted education on the risks and the reasons for the restrictions.

POSSIBLE INITIATIVE

Introduce a restriction that prohibits Provisional licence holders under 26 from driving high-powered and heavy vehicles.

Comment: Support. The Victorian model can usefully be followed, with a power to weight or capacity to weight restriction. A model already exists with motorcycle licensing and a parallel can be drawn.

Having said this the difficulties should not be forgotten. A ban may affect access to the family car in some cases.

Further, the problems in evaluating the effectiveness of this measure are significant. It may be difficult to determine in particular cases whether the power capability of the vehicle was the prime contributor, or whether it was a matter of excessive speed or loss of control that could have been achieved in any vehicle. Further, it is perfectly possible for those subject to a ban to purchase vehicles just of power or engine capacity just below the threshold and still have a very powerful vehicle. There may be difficulties in determining if a vehicle has been modified to exceed the threshold values.

Further it should not be imagined that banning high powered vehicles will solve the problem, given that a head-on collision at 80 or 100 km/h is likely to be fatal under virtually any circumstances.

Even so a ban on high powered vehicles has symbolic value and can be supported.

Recommendation: Consider introducing a vehicle power to weight or engine capacity to weight restriction for drivers under 26 years.

POSSIBLE INITIATIVE

Modify the demerit point structure of the Graduated Licensing Scheme to further encourage safer driving by young people.

Comment: The present structure is already fairly stringent, making it possible for the licence to be suspended for minor offences. It does not appear that there is much to be gained by making the system yet more stringent. It may have undesirable side effects, one of which might be to increase unlicensed driving, and another to increase contempt for and grievance against the system.

The idea of a mandatory offence free period before graduating to an unrestricted licence is worth consideration. ACRS does not favour the idea of extending demerit points into the unrestricted licence stage. Logically it is inconsistent with the notion of an 'unrestricted' licence and it effectively adds another tier to the graduated licensing system. The only justification for doing so would be on the basis of crash and offence data indicating a problem in the period immediately following award of an unrestricted licence, and that that data indicated that lowering the demerit point threshold would solve those problems.

Recommendation: ACRS does not support further lowering the demerit point schedule

OPTIONS CATEGORY 3 – NIGHT DRIVING

POSSIBLE INITIATIVE

Introduce a night driving restriction between 10pm and 5am for a defined period for P1 drivers under 26. There would be exemptions, such as for driving to and from work and study, and for medical emergencies.

Comment: As with passenger restrictions a night time driving restriction is nearly unenforceable by conventional means, and to be effective would need to rely heavily on voluntary compliance. Similar arguments to those on passenger restrictions apply. A night driving restriction must balance individual and society wants and needs so that the road safety benefits offset the loss of mobility. Therefore, attempts to impose restrictions must balance non-compliance and evasion against the benefits that might be gained in reducing crashes amongst those who will comply.

Young drivers are most vulnerable in the first six and probably twelve months after gaining their provisional licence. It is then that they are first loose on the roads without the safety net of an accompanying licensed driver, and it is also then that the effect of sufficient or insufficient practice is most strongly felt. And if they have not had reasonably extensive night driving practice then they are doubly at risk.

It is worth recapitulating briefly some of the issues in night driving. For experienced drivers, what darkness and shadows hide can be filled up to a considerable extent by cues in the road and road environment that can be extrapolated to give a very good idea of what might be there. It is precisely the lack of experience that puts new drivers so much at risk, and points up the importance of extensive night driving practice in the learner permit period.

Senserrick and Whelan report that while non-compliance is widely reported in the US there have still been substantial reductions in crash risk. As with passenger restrictions the value of the night driving restriction may be in its symbolism and in the fact that its existence reinforces parental authority and young people's own preferences. In the US official enforcement is seen as of secondary enforcement to parental control and self-enforcement.

Also as with passenger restrictions, it is highly important that the imposition of a night driving restriction be accompanied by public education that links the restriction with the risk and emphasises that it is a matter of safety not punishment; a trade-off of some short term loss of mobility and independence against long term survival. That education should include reference to the effects of fatigue and sleep deprivation for which the risks are generally insufficiently understood and on which young people are especially at risk (see Bartlett et al, 2003⁽¹¹⁾).

Although a curfew commencing at 10 pm reflects the crash risk profile, a better course may be a midnight start in the interests of better acceptance and compliance. This reflects the amount of freedom and independence young people of 17 and 18 years have and expect in Australia compared to the lower licensing ages that apply in the US and New Zealand. Given also that some of the greatest risk with young people is in the presence of peers, the weight of restrictions should reflect that risk and can probably be relaxed somewhat under other conditions. ACRS suggests:

- Restriction to be in force for the duration of P1 (but see below)

- Exemption to be granted for driving to and from work and study, including early sport and other training, and for medical emergencies
- Exemption when accompanied by a fully licensed driver over 25

It has been argued above that the great risk factors in night driving for young people are inexperience and peer effects. Consideration might be given to requiring an accompanying driver for only the first six months for new drivers who can demonstrate extensive night time driving experience on their log book of, say 20 hours where the log book requirement is 100 hours. This should only be permitted in combination with a passenger restriction.

Recommendation: A night driving restriction be carefully considered, and if instituted to be arranged to reflect the greatest risk factors. It should be preceded and accompanied by extensive public education.

POSSIBLE INITIATIVE

Include a requirement of 15 hours of night supervised on-road driving for Learner drivers.

Comment: Strongly support. It has been argued above that lack of experience is one of the greatest risk elements in driving at night. ACRS⁽⁴⁾ included night driving in its suggested practice regime in 1996.

Recommendation: Institute a night driving practice component in the log book schedule immediately. If the log book minimum is increased from 50 to 100 hours, make this component 20 hours.

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Attachment

ACRS POLICY STATEMENT ON YOUNG DRIVERS

ACRS Policy Position

Young drivers under the age of 25 are the most vulnerable road users in Australia. ACRS supports measures to better prepare new drivers before licensing and to enhance their capacity to consolidate driving skills under low risk conditions during the provisional licence period. This includes:

- measures to encourage learner drivers to make the most effective use of the minimum (six months in most jurisdictions) learner permit period
- measures to encourage learner drivers to obtain at least 100 hours driving practice while holding a learner permit, in addition to any formal lessons, under a wide range of road, traffic and environmental conditions. Such practice should be 'graduated' from simplest, least risky situations to begin with through to normal road and traffic conditions as competence is gained
- measures to provide resources and educational opportunities to parents, carers and learners to help them achieve the above goal
- measures to encourage parents and carers to take a pro-active role in helping learners to practice and gain constructive and directed driving experience
- measures to help all parties to understand that learning continues well past the award of a driver's licence
- measures to encourage motivation to drive safely rather than to take risks
- measures to improve safety during the provisional licence period.

Objective

To reduce the over-representation of young drivers in road trauma.

Discussion

Young drivers under the age of 25 are the most vulnerable road users in Australia. They make up about one sixth of all drivers but close to one third of drivers killed.

Presently available licensing and training methods have not succeeded in giving new drivers the skills that are believed to be most important for survival: anticipation and judgement; the ability to observe, understand and make sense of the road and traffic environment, to make judgements and take the 'right' actions to overcome hazards. Research suggests that this has much to do with the process of learning and the fact that it takes time and experience to

develop the mental 'maps' of the road and traffic environment that permit the development of cognitive and perceptual skills.

Problems of learning to drive are exacerbated by the fact that young persons' ability to perceive and make correct judgements about risks and hazards is underdeveloped, and further that the teenage years are when young persons are more likely to take risks.

ACRS advocates that learner drivers and their supervisors and instructors make maximum use of statutory learner permit periods to obtain as much driving experience and practice as possible under controlled conditions in which the risks are reduced as much as possible. The experience should be 'graduated' to more complex and demanding driving and traffic conditions as the learner gains experience, under as wide a range of driving conditions as possible.

The range and depth of the experience to be obtained should be such that when the new driver obtains a provisional licence he or she will have already encountered and driven under all the conditions a driver can normally expect to meet.

The aim should be to actively and constructively prepare the learner for the point at which he or she will go 'solo' on obtaining a provisional licence, while getting across the idea that obtaining a licence is just the beginning of a lifetime learning process.

ACRS encourages the professional driver training industry to develop materials and resources to help parents and non professional supervisors to work in partnership with professional driver trainers in integrated and cooperative programs.

There is need for continued research into the driver learning process and the way in which driving skills, attitudes and motivation are acquired, and how to reduce the vulnerability of provisional licensees. There is also a continuing need to identify and develop innovative programs and projects that effectively address young driver over-representation in road trauma, and to constantly re-evaluate them for effectiveness and in the light of new research.

Note: This policy statement does not apply to motorcycle riders, for which different learning and licence acquisition requirements apply.