

2015/21: Should the driving age in Australia be lowered?

What they said...

'Many young people that only have public transport to depend on are being very disadvantaged; this, of course, can be relieved by lowering the driving age...'

Khalid Issa, 17-year-old Victorian high school student

'A 17 year old driver with a P1 licence is four times more likely to be involved in a fatal crash than a driver over 26 years'

The Young Driver Fact Base

The issue at a glance

On November 29, 2015, Victorian state MP James Purcell announced his intention to put up a motion in Parliament's upper house to hold an inquiry into lowering Victoria's driving age.

On December 9, 2015, Mr Purcell put the motion to the house.

The pressure to lower the driving age is greatest in Victoria as it is the Australian state with the highest driving age. Only in Victoria does a young person have to be 18 before he or she can be awarded a provisional drivers' licence.

However, there have periodically been suggestions from a number of jurisdictions that the driving age be made as low as 16, the legal driving age in the Northern Territory.

Despite intermittent agitation, especially in Victoria, for a lowering of the driving age, there are a number of road safety groups that have disputed such a move, claiming it would increase accidents and fatalities on Australian roads.

Australian state governments do not currently appear about to institute such a change. However, the pressure for this is unlikely to disappear, particularly from country regions where access to public transport can be very limited.

Background

(Most of the information below was drawn from two sources.

The first source is the Wikipedia entry titled 'Driving licence in Australia'. The full text of this entry can be accessed at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Driving_licence_in_Australia

The second is Law Stuff-Know your rights-cars and driving-licences. The full text can be accessed at http://www.lawstuff.org.au/qld_law/topics/cars-and-driving/licences)

Driving licence in Australia

A driver's licence (or driver licence) is required in Australia before a person is permitted to drive a motor vehicle of any description on a road in Australia. The responsibility for the regulation and enforcement of road use, including light vehicle driver licensing is the responsibility of the state and territory governments.

Learners' permit

All Australian states and territories require the learner driver to acquire a learners' permit. This permit will only be given after a learners' test has been passed. Once the learner has a permit he or she may receive supervised instruction and driving practised with another fully licensed driver. This may include formal lessons from a driving instructor.

Most states and territories set a stipulated period during which the learners' permit must have been held, before the learner can be tested for a drivers' licence.

During this period most states and territories require the learner to keep a log of his/her driving practice so that he/she can demonstrate having driven in a range of conditions.

Driving age

The minimum driving age varies between States and Territories. It is 18 years in Victoria, 16 years and 6 months in the Northern Territory, and 17 years in the other states and the ACT. Interestingly, a number of states and territories, including South Australia, have recently considered raising their legal driving ages to 18 in line with Victoria. Learner drivers may drive, under qualified supervision, from 15 years and 9 months in the ACT and 16 years in the other states and the Northern Territory.

Graduated licence or provisional licence schemes

All Australian states and territories have a graduated licence or provisional licence scheme. This means that the new driver has restrictions imposed on the conditions under which he or she is able to drive. These restrictions vary from state to state. Those which apply in **Queensland** are listed below.

What special rules apply to P-plates (that is those on a provisional licence)?

If you are driving a car on a P1 licence:

You must display the red and white "P" plates on your vehicle. These requirements are the same as displaying "L" plates;

You must have ZERO alcohol or illegal or prescription drugs in your system while driving;

You must not use any functions of a mobile phone (including hands free devices or speaker phone) while driving.

Passengers cannot use a phone in loudspeaker mode while you are driving;

You must not drive prohibited high performance vehicles;

If you are under 25, you may only carry 1 passenger under the age of 21 (who is not a family member) between 11pm and 5am.

If you are driving a car on a P2 licence:

You must display the green and white "P" plates on your vehicle. These requirements are the same as displaying the "L" and "P1" plates;

You must have ZERO alcohol or illegal or prescription drugs in your system while driving;

You must not drive prohibited high performance vehicles.

Internet information

On December 10, 2015, Victorian MP James Purcell posted on his Internet site material suggesting that the impetus for his motion to have lowering the driving age in Victoria investigated came from requests from parents in his constituency. The full text of this claim can be accessed at <http://www.jamespurcell.com.au/parent-supports-mp-james-purcells-push-for-victorias-youth-to-gain-drivers-licence-earlier/>

On December 9, 2015, Victorian MP James Purcell put a motion to the upper house of the Victorian parliament calling for an inquiry into lowering the driving age in that state to 17.

The motion gives detailed reasons as to why Mr Purcell believes the change should be considered.

The full text can be accessed at http://www.jamespurcell.com.au/motion-for-inquiry-into-lowering-the-driving-age-in-victoria-to-17/?doing_wp_cron=1452212894.0974309444427490234375

On December 7, 2017, The Moyne Gazette published a news report titled 'Parent supports MP James Purcell's push for Victoria's youth to gain drivers licence earlier'

The report focused on the views of a parent living in a Victorian country town who favourably contrasts the driving age of 17 which pertains in New South Wales with the age of 18 as applied in Victoria.

The full text of this article can be accessed at <http://www.moynegazette.com.au/story/3541722/lowered-licence-age-push/?cs=1484>

On December 3, 2015, The Geelong Advertiser ran a news report on the call from Victorian MP James Purcell to have the driving age in Victoria lowered to 17. The report includes a number of comments from Mr Purcell supporting his proposition.

The full text of this news report can be accessed at <http://www.geelongadvertiser.com.au/news/geelong/geelong-mp-james-purcell-calls-for-victorian-driving-age-to-be-lowered-to-17/news-story/43d0e3942bfac872fc368d265f0e2612>

On December 2, 2015, The Courier published a news report detailing support among Ballarat driving instructors that the driving age in Victoria be lowered to 17.

The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://www.thecourier.com.au/story/3532589/instructors-back-driving-age-motion/>

On July 10, 2015, The Sydney Morning Herald published a report by student journalist being trained as part of a Fairfax mentor program. The report gives more prominence to the arguments supporting a lowering of the driving age to 17 in Victorian than to the counter arguments.

The full text of the report can be accessed at <http://www.smh.com.au/national/education/young-victorians-cheated-by-higher-driving-age-20150710-gi9gy1.html>

In December 2014 a 17-year-old Victorian high school student, Khalid Issa posted a petition on change.org calling for the Victorian government to lower the driving age in Victoria to 17.

The full text of this petition can be accessed at <https://www.change.org/p/vicroads-allow-victorians-to-obtain-their-p-plates-at-17-years-old>

In October 2014 the New South Wales Centre for Road Safety released a policy framework document examining the operation of graduated drivers' licence schemes across Australia.

Among the interesting trends it notes is a decreased reliance on cars among young people in New South Wales with access to plentiful, reliable public transport.

The full text of this document can be accessed at <http://roadsafety.transport.nsw.gov.au/downloads/gls.pdf>

On October 20, 2014, the American Automobile Association (AAA) published a news report titled 'Experience Matters More than Age with Young-Adult Driver Safety'

The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://newsroom.aaa.com/2014/10/experience-matters-age-young-adult-driver-safety/>

On October 14, 2013, the Herald Sun published a news report on recent studies indicating the extent of illegal under-age drinking in Victoria.

The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/law-order/underage-drinking-on-a-high-among-teenagers/story-fni0fee2-1226739193002>

Youth Safe is a not-for-profit consultation and lobby group formed to promote youth safety in New South Wales. Youth Safe's Internet site gives details on the high representation of those aged between 15 and 25 among those who are annually injured in Australia.

These statistics can be accessed at <http://www.youthsafe.org/facts-and-figures>

The Australian Law Reform Commission (ALRC) has released a statement of its position on the decision-making capacity of young Australian citizens based on physiological studies of their brain functioning.

The ALRC's conclusion is that mature judgement and decision-making capacity has not formed in most cases until a young person is 25.

The full text of this report can be accessed at <http://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/For%20Your%20Information%3A%20Australian%20Privacy%20Law%20and%20Practice%20%28ALRC%20Report%20108%29%20/68-decisio>

In 1994 the Federal Government's Road Safety Initiative released a report produced for it by Monash University's Accident Research Centre. The report is titled 'The Influence of Age-Related and Experience-Related Factors on Reported Driving Behaviour and Crashes'. The report concluded that experience was a more powerful determinant of automobile accidents than driver age.

The full text of the report can be accessed at http://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/217229/atsb143.pdf

In 1994 the Federal Government's Road Safety Initiative released a report produced for it by Monash University's Accident Research Centre. The report is titled 'Evaluation of Australia's Graduated Licensing Scheme'

The full text of the report can be accessed at http://www.monash.edu/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/217078/atsb136.pdf

Arguments in favour of lowering the driving age in Australia

1. 16- and 17-year-olds need to be able to drive for employment and to meet other transport needs.

It has been claimed that denying 16- and 17-year-olds the opportunity to obtain their licences is highly discriminatory as they have transport needs that are currently not being met. The situation is seen as particularly discriminatory in Victoria, as it is the only state that makes 18 the earliest age at which a young person can obtain a probationary licence. Critics of the current regulations note that in the Northern Territory young drivers aged 16 years and 6 months are able to obtain their probationary licences. They claim that young people across the country have transport needs which they should be able to meet for themselves.

Victorian MP James Purcell has claimed that this limitation is particularly unjust toward those young people living in country areas where there is poor public transport as it leaves them completely reliant on their parents to take them to and from work and to pursue their other community involvements.

Mr Purcell has argued that lowering the age in Victoria would allow 17-year-olds to be more independent. It would give them easier access to their schools, jobs and apprenticeships.

Mr Purcell has stated, 'Parents of students and apprentices in regional and rural Victoria are driving long distances, sometimes very early in the morning, to ferry their children who should be allowed to drive themselves.'

Mr Purcell has added, 'When you're limited with public transport it does become a big problem...' He said constituents in his western Victorian electorate, some on farms and in small towns, had lobbied him to bring about the change.

In the motion he moved in the Victorian upper house on December 9, 2015, Mr Purcell stated, 'In our patch of the woods we face a huge barrier to young people gaining meaningful employment. One of our biggest barriers is our public transport infrastructure, or more correctly the lack of it. Where I live rural towns and farming communities may have one or two return bus services to a regional centre - if they are lucky. Many outlying towns do not even have the privilege of a bus service. In addition to this, many members of our community in agriculture and trades-based jobs do not work 9 to 5. Their morning starts could be at 6.00 a.m. or earlier, but there is no metropolitan train coming every 10 minutes; there is only mum or dad to drive them to work, which could take an hour or more.'

The situation in Victoria is deemed particularly unjust as that state allows its young people to leave school at 17, yet denies them access to the independent transport which would assist them in holding down a job or getting additional work-related training.

In February 2015 high school student Khalid Issa launched a petition calling on Road Safety Minister, Luke Donnellan, and VicRoads to 'allow Victorians to obtain their P-plates at 17 years old.. Within three days it had attracted more than 18,000 signatures.

Khalid Issa stated, 'I'm definitely not alone in this. I have so many friends that just want to start a career a little bit early but they're kind of put on hold just because Victoria...has this rule.'

In a petition posted on change.org, Khalid Issa stated, 'I have personally met many young people that are looking for apprentice tradie work but are unable to due to not having a drivers' license and I myself am in this situation right now. I have employers contact me telling me that they cannot hire me because I don't have a driver's license.'

Khalid Issa added, 'The public transport in Victoria, is to say the least "unreliable", delayed and cancelled public transport is a common occurrence. This means many young people that only have public transport to depend on are being very disadvantaged; this, of course, can be relieved by lowering the driving age to 17 years old.'

2. 16- and 17-year-olds are not legally able to consume alcohol

It has been stated that lowering the driving age to 16- or 17-years-of-age across Australia would have the advantage of creating a buffer year or 18-month period during which young people would not be able legally to access alcohol yet would be able legally to drive. This should make it easier to separate the two activities. Currently the fact that the legal driving age is the same as the legal drinking age sends mixed messages to young people.

In a reader's emailed comment submitted to The Age on November 30, 2015, it was stated, 'Drive at 17.. yes ..it provides a sober year... to learn to be a better driver before being allowed to drink at 18.'

Victorian high school student Khalid Issa placed a petition on change.org in which he stated, 'Allowing 17 year olds to get their P Plates gives them the chance to have a full year of solo driving experience before they turn 18. This means that...that by the time they are 18 and are able to legally buy/drink alcohol they won't be on the roads totally inexperienced and they will know not to drink and drive.'

Right now the laws are that at 18 you can get your P Plates and begin drinking alcohol at the same age. These two privileges don't go hand in hand, but if we allow people to get their P Plates at 17 they will have a full year of solo driving experience to know not to drink and drive.'

Australia has long recognised that what is necessary is to separate the age at which people begin driving from the age at which they begin to consume alcohol.

An Australian study conducted in 1987 stated, 'The major aim of any graduated licensing scheme is to separate these two steps [legal drinking age and minimum driving age] or reduce their combined effect.'

This can be achieved by separating them in time or by imposing restrictions on drinking for young drivers.'

Australia has currently taken the second route, that is, across Australia, young people are legally able to drive at the same age as (or very near to) that at which they are legally able to drink, yet there are restrictions imposed on their licences to prevent them driving under the influence of any alcohol.

There are those who have suggested that it may be more effective to lower the legal driving age so that young drivers are not legally able to consume alcohol under any circumstances for a number of years after the age at which most have gained their drivers' licences. The 1987 report just quoted further noted, '[T]he Federal Office of Road Safety model suggests a starting age for young drivers of 16 years, to give a time separation from the legal drinking age. The model assumes greater parental control at the earlier age, which may curtail the possibility of illegal or private drinking and driving.'

3. 16- and 17-year-olds are under stronger parental supervision

It has been claimed that 16- and 17-year-old may well make better drivers than those a couple of years older because they are still under closer parental supervision. They are likely to still be living at home, attending school and to be more economically and psychologically reliant on their parents. It has been argued that this is likely to mean that they are more disposed to have their driving behaviour moderated by their parents.

This point of view was put in an emailed reader comment published in The Age on November 30, 2015. The reader stated, 'At 18, most kids have left or are leaving school. They no longer are legally under the care or supervision of their parents.. .and they know it.'

At 17, my children still take guidance from me. They can't legally drink, and they don't have the peer group pressures that overtake all of us in our first year out of school.

I'd much rather have my children's first year of driving be at an age where I still have an influence over their behaviour. I watched my oldest go wild at the age of 18.... overtaken by the excitement of a first year out of school, and being able to go to a pub and party with friends.... how he survived on the road that year I'm not sure, but I'm certain he was a danger to himself and others.'

Similarly, a 1987 federal study stated, '[T]he Federal Office of Road Safety model suggests a starting age for young drivers of 16 years, to give a time separation from the legal drinking age. The model assumes greater parental control at the earlier age, which may curtail the possibility of illegal or private drinking and driving.'

4. 16- and 17-year-olds can be given graduated licences and the same amount of pre-licence driver experience

Those who argue that the driving age should be lower to 16 or 17 do not suggest that these young drivers should avoid an extended period of pre-driver education before they are able to be tested for their drivers' licence. They also want the same, if not stricter, conditions to apply to new drivers during their probationary period as part of a graduated licence scheme.

Mr James Purcell, a Victorian PM who is seeking to have the legal driving age in his state lowered to 17, has noted, 'Learner drivers (L plate) should still have to fulfil the safest number of prerequisite hours behind the wheel but they could also start earlier.'

Studies conducted in the United States have indicated that pre-driver education and a graduated licence scheme may be of greater significance in reducing the likelihood of accident and death than the age at which a driver is first able to acquire a licence.

Generally graduated licence schemes apply to 16- and 17-year-old drivers in the United States. Those who obtain their licence at 18 or older do not generally have to abide by a graduated licence scheme. A news report, published in October 2014 and drawing on the results of several studies of accident rates in different states of the United States concluded, 'Experience behind the wheel may matter more than age when it comes to the safety of young-adult drivers, according to two new studies by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety. These results suggest that states could reduce road crashes, fatalities and injuries by extending graduated driver licensing (GDL) laws to novice drivers beyond age 17.'

5. 16- and 17-year-olds are not more reckless than other young drivers

It has been claimed that 16- and 17-year-old drivers are no more likely to recklessness or ill-judgement than other drivers under 25.

A 1994 study conducted by Monash University's Accident Research Centre concluded, 'Drivers who obtain a licence relatively early were no more reckless than those who are licensed when somewhat older.' The study did demonstrate that recklessness was a significant risk factor; however, though it was more likely to be a characteristic of young drivers, there was no evidence to suggest that one age cohort of young drivers was more likely to be reckless than another. The same study also concluded that when respective levels of experience were taken into account, age did not seem to be the crucial determinant of accident involvement among young drivers. According to this study, what predominantly determined the likelihood of young drivers being in an accident was their lack of driving experience.

Supporters of 16- and 17-year-olds being able to receive a probationary licence argue that so long as these young drivers have the same enforced period of practice prior to seeking to obtain a licence and the same graduated licence requirements imposed on them after they have gained their licences they should be at no greater risk than other drivers under 25.

Arguments against lowering the driving age in Australia

1. Young drivers already have the highest accident rate

Opponents of lowering the driving age argue that young people are already dramatically over-represented in road casualty and fatality rates. According to this argument, increasing the period during which young people can legally drive by an additional 18 months to two years will simply result in an even greater number of road accidents involving young people. The youth safety lobby group YouthSafe has drawn attention to the high accident rate among young drivers. The group has stressed that young drivers are significantly over-represented in road traffic accidents resulting in both injury and death. This is the case in Australia and worldwide. In 2007 the World Health Organisation released data showing that each year nearly 400,000 people under 25 years die on the world's roads.

In 2013, the Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics revealed that in Australia, the population-based rate for road deaths of young adults is 56 per cent higher than for all age groups.

The Young Driver Fact Base states, 'Of all hospitalisations of young Australians, almost half are drivers involved in a road traffic crash and another quarter are passengers.' The same fact base notes, 'Young drivers (17 - 25 years) represent one-quarter of all Australian road deaths, but are only 10 - 15% of the licensed driver population' and further states, 'A 17 year old driver with a P1 licence is four times more likely to be involved in a fatal crash than a driver over 26 years.'

Such risks are particularly acute for young male drivers. The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare stated that in 2010, in the 15-24 year age group in Australia, death rates among males were three times as high as among females in road traffic deaths (15 and 5 per 100, 000 respectively).

In 2013, the Australian Department of Infrastructure & Regional Development revealed that the highest risk period for young Australian drivers is shortly after they get their licence, and continues up to age 24. Critics of lowering the driving age in Australia argue that all such an initiative would do is increase the highest risk period from six years to eight.

Transport Accident Commission chief executive Janet Dore said that anything that encourages earlier driver licensing also increases crash risk. Ms Dore noted, 'When Canada reduced the minimum driver licensing age to 16 from 18, crash involvement among new drivers increased by 12 per cent and fatalities increased by 24 per cent.'

A Victorian government discussion paper released in 2005 calculated that if the driving age was lowered to 17, the road toll would rise by 20 in the first year, with 250 more people seriously injured, and by 13 extra deaths each year thereafter, with 200 more serious injuries.

2. 16- and 17-year-olds consume alcohol illegally

Many more young people use alcohol than tobacco or illegal drugs. By age 18, more than 70 percent of teens have had at least one drink.

An Australian National Health Survey on Drug Use and Health conducted in 2008 by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration noted that as they grow older, the chance that young people will use alcohol increases. Approximately 10 percent of 12-year-olds say they have used alcohol at least once. By age 13 that number doubles. And by age 15, approximately 50 percent have had at least one drink.

Teenagers drink less often than adults. But when teens do drink, they drink more than adults. On average, young people have five drinks or more on a single occasion. This binge drinking behaviour is particularly hazardous and would have serious consequences if combined with driving.

Binge drinking means drinking significantly more than the recommended level of four standard drinks on any one occasion. In the 2011 report on tobacco, alcohol, over-the-counter and illicit substance use among Australian secondary school students, around 6.4 per cent of Australian secondary school students drank more than four drinks on one day in the previous seven days.

In 2013, Jerril Retcher, CEO of Vichealth which funded research with the Australian Research Council into the under-age drinking problem in Victoria, noted that almost three quarters of young people are drinking at levels that put them at short-term risk of injury.

Critics note that such behaviours among under-age drinkers make it completely inappropriate to lower the age at which it is legally permissible to drive in Australia. It is claimed that such an age reduction would bring about the same conjunction of driving and alcohol consumption only at an age when the young drinker was even less physically and

psychologically equipped to manage his or her behaviour.

3. 16- and 17-year-olds already have access to driver education

Various organizations or groups operate special driver training programs for learners and pre learners. These programs usually aim to encourage the development of safe driving techniques, and can involve road law knowledge tuition and some in-car components, either on an off-road track or circuit, or on-road under supervision.

Numerous studies conducted in Australia and overseas have cast doubt on the effectiveness of pre-driver education conducted within schools or in programs run in conjunction with schools. What has been found effective is extended periods of learner instruction for those seeking to obtain their licences. This option is available now.

In all states of Australia it is possible to gain a learners licence at 16-years of age. This group is then able to undertake extensive driver education both with paid instructors and with a supervisor who has a driver's licence (usually a parent). In 2002 the RACV (the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria) released a paper titled 'Research studies suggest that the best learning environment for the beginning driver is the real road system under the supervision of an experienced driver or instructor. Learner drivers under supervision on-road have a low risk of crash involvement, probably the lowest of all driver groups. The accumulation of an on-road driving "experience bank" is perhaps the major potential contributor to reduced crash risk in solo driving for novice drivers.'

It concluded, 'Research studies suggest that the best learning environment for the beginning driver is the real road system under the supervision of an experienced driver or instructor. Learner drivers under supervision on-road have a low risk of crash involvement, probably the lowest of all driver groups. The accumulation of an on-road driving "experience bank" is perhaps the major potential contributor to reduced crash risk in solo driving for novice drivers.' The same RACV report noted that various state authorities are now requiring extended periods of on-road supervised practice before young people are able to try-out for a licence. 'This approach has been taken up by most Australian driver licensing jurisdictions and some in North America via the implementation of Graduated Licensing schemes (GLS) which provide for and encourage learner drivers to gain more supervised, on-road driving experience before solo driving. However, this approach requires cooperation between novice drivers, parents (or supervisors) and professional driving instructors over a period of months and perhaps years.'

4. Young people's brains are not yet fully developed and so are unsuited to the decision-making required to drive well

It has been demonstrated that the human brain continues to grow until at least an individual's twenties and that the areas of the brain last to consolidate are those involving decision-making. Those concerned about reducing the driving age argue that 16- and 17-year-olds simply do not have the cognitive capacity necessary to take the decisions that driving involves.

The Australian Law Reform Commission's report on decision-making by and for individuals under the age of 18 states, 'The frontal lobe of the brain is responsible for functions such as organising thoughts, setting priorities, planning and making judgments. Scientists have discovered that the frontal lobe undergoes significant change during adolescence... The research suggests that the frontal lobe, and therefore an individual's decision-making capacity, has not reached full maturity until some time in a person's early twenties.'

The over-representation of young people in transport related accidents has been linked to risky driving behaviours including speeding, driving when fatigued, and driving under the influence of alcohol or other drugs as well as limited development of hazard perception. These behaviours and limitations have been linked to inexperience and to the stage of brain development of the young driver.

Research conducted in New Zealand in 2007 linked poor driving behaviours to the young drivers' stage of brain development. The research was carried out by Robert Isler, director of the traffic and road safety research group at the University of Waikato in New Zealand.

Dr Isler suggested that the lack of brain development was a 'common crash risk factor' in the younger age group.

Dr Isler stated, 'Brain studies have shown that the frontal lobes are not fully developed until young people reach the age of 25 years, the same time when age disappears as a risk factor for crashes, even after driving experience is taken into account.'

Dr Isler concluded, 'It seems plausible that immature executive functioning (of the brain) may lie behind the poor hazard anticipation and detection skills that seem to characterise many adolescent drivers. But like any other brain function, they can be enhanced with appropriate training.'

5. We need better public transport, not a reduced driving age

Improvements in public transport appear to reduce the reliance of young people on automobile driving.

Recent trends in New South Wales suggest that people aged under 35 are becoming less likely to hold a driver's licence. One of the significant factors contributing to this trend has been a concentration of population in established urban areas which provide access to public transport. Data from the Household Travel Survey shows that people living in higher density inner suburban locations have a lower propensity to own a car or hold a driver's licence.

In 2010, Australasian Transport Research Forum produced a paper titled 'Why are young people driving less? Trends in licence-holding and travel behaviour'.

One of the research forum's conclusions regarding reduced car ownership and licence-holding in Sydney was 'These higher density suburbs generally have access to high quality public transport services, so there is less perceived need for a car to gain independent mobility.'

It has also been noted that in built-up areas where the expense of living is high, where traffic congestion is significant and where parking facilities can be limited there is less incentive for young people to own a car. Instead, it has been noted, they are taking advantage of other transport options apart from public transport. The research forum report noted an increased incidence of walking and cycling.

Critics maintain that this changing pattern of transportation use among young suburbanites needs an increase in funding

of public transport. In 2010, the Australasian Transport Research Forum paper stated, 'The increasing importance of public transport access to jobs, services, and local shopping opportunities is clear.'

Those who condemn moves to lower the legal driving age say that at least in some suburban areas this change is not supported by the demonstrated behaviour of young people living in these areas.

Further implications

Current trends in managing the behaviour of young drivers do not seem to support the contention that their safety would be increased if the driving age were reduced.

There has been a pleasing decline in the accident and mortality rate among young drivers in Australia. However, this is not linked to any decrease in the driving age, rather it seems to be at least in part connected to the additional training and experience requirements young people now have to met before they can obtain a drivers licence, as well as to the protracted period during which young drivers are now held on a restricted probationary licence.

A graduated licensing scheme was one of the elements of the 1 0-point road safety package announced in December 1989 as part of the Federal Government's Road Safety Initiative, for adoption by States and Territories.

The initial components of the Graduated Licensing Scheme were:

zero blood alcohol concentration (BAC) for learner drivers

zero BAC for the first three years after obtaining a non-learners licence up to 25 years of age

no learner permits to be issued before 16 years of age

no probationary licence to be issued before 17 years of age

the minimum period for a learner permit to be 6 months

Over time and depending on the jurisdiction in which the driver lives, many of these requirements have become more rigorous. In Victoria, for example, new drivers are introduced to driving through progressive stages of being a learner, a P1 probationary driver, a P2 probationary driver and then a fully licensed driver.

Key features of Victoria's graduated licensing system include:

compulsory 120 hours of logged supervised learner driving experience

a minimum 12 month learner permit period

a challenging on-road driving test

a two stage probationary licence - P1 (minimum one year) and P2 (minimum three years)

a peer passenger restriction for P1 drivers

probationary drivers are prohibited from driving certain vehicles

a range of educational support measures

a ban on mobile phone use for all probationary drivers.

All Australian jurisdictions have some form of graduated licence scheme (GLS) currently in place. This has been credited with having brought about a dramatic reduction in accidents involving young drivers. The Australasian Transport Research Forum has stated, 'National road trauma data shows that fatalities among the 15-24 age group have reduced by 29% over the last ten years and each Australian jurisdiction has achieved reductions, largely due to the introduction of GLS models in all jurisdictions.'

The 2010 Australasian Transport Research Forum paper concluded, 'The Graduated Licence Scheme has reduced licence-holding levels among young people in NSW. It is likely that the combination of the requirement for 120 hours of driving experience, and the increased costs, have deterred, or at least slowed, the uptake of licences by young people. This reduced exposure to risk will partially explain why the fatality rates per head of population are in decline.' One of the additional reforms that the Australasian Transport Research Forum recommends is an increase, rather than a decline, in the legal driving age. The Forum states, 'The older a young person is when they are licensed the safer they are.'

Newspaper items used in the compilation of this issue outline

Age, November 30, 2015, page 10, news item by Benjamin Preiss, 'MP pushes for licence at 17'.

<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/push-to-lower-driving-age-in-victoria-to-17-20151129-glarv0.html>