C-MARC

FACT SHEET NO. 3

IMPROVING NOVICE DRIVER SAFETY THROUGH
GRADULATED LICENSING

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1. Purpose of this Fact Sheet

This paper has the following purposes:

- to provide an overview of the novice driver safety problem;
- to describe the basic features and benefits of graduated licensing schemes (GLS) in use around the world; and
- to describe Western Australia’s current Graduated Driver Training and Licensing (GDT&L) provisions for novice drivers.

2. What is a graduated driver licensing scheme?

GLS have been likened to an apprenticeship system - a gradual introduction to independent driving by providing adequate supervision and delayed exposure to some key driving risks. GLS often consist of three stages with accompanying restrictions:

- a learner period, which allows only supervised driving;
- an intermediate or provisional licensing period allowing unsupervised driving but subject to numerous restrictions intended to reduce exposure to high-risk situations; and
- full licensing, which occurs when the first two stages have been completed.

This structured approach is built upon two basic principles:

- expansion of the learning process: the longer the time between issue of the first licence permit and the full, unrestricted licence, the safer the unsupervised driver will be;
- reduction of risk exposure: the greater the amount of driving experience in controlled lower-risk circumstances, the safer the unsupervised driver will be.

However considerable variation is possible within this general framework – and in particular, many differences in the restrictions that seek to control driver risk during the first years of Provisional driving. While restrictions include nil blood alcohol levels, no night-time driving, reduced permissible speeds, limits to the number of peer passengers, restrictions in vehicle power-to-weight ratios or vehicle size and a reduced tolerance to driving infringements, few jurisdictions adopt the full set.
3. Why have a graduated driver licensing scheme?

Young people, especially as drivers, represent a leading road safety challenge. A recent report showed that traffic crashes are the single greatest killer of people aged 15-24 years in OECD countries, accounting for 35 percent of all deaths for this age group\(^1\) – with around one-half of those deaths occurring to young drivers\(^2\).

Looking at more local crash data:

- over the period 1985-2008, drivers aged 17-25 were killed in road crashes at twice to three times the rate of middle-aged drivers – with this over-representation being especially marked for males\(^2\); and
- in Western Australia for the period 2002-2007 and in round terms, drivers aged 17-24 years accounted for 30 percent of all crashes reported to police while representing only 15 percent of licensed drivers\(^3\).

Young drivers’ increased crash risk is magnified once distance driven is taken into account. Drivers in the youngest age group (17-20 years) are over eleven times more likely to be killed than drivers aged 40-44 years – while those aged 21-25 years have five times the risk of death\(^4\).

As suggested by these two different risk levels and as shown in Figure 1\(^3\), a young driver’s crash risk is highest immediately upon gaining his or her licence. Considering all crashes reported to Western Australian police in a given year, young drivers have a four-times crash rate in the first month of driving relative to the crash rate after five years.

![Figure 1: Crash rates during the first five years of driving, Western Australia 1998.](image)

Young drivers’ high crash levels are usually attributed to three factors\(^5\):

- inexperience: it takes time for the necessary driving skills to be mastered and readily used especially under unexpected driving conditions;
- immaturity: as a broad rule, youth is characterised particularly by risk-taking and impulsiveness, not just in driving but in many areas of life; and
- increased risk exposure: for lifestyle and other reasons, young drivers often drive under the riskiest conditions – for example, night driving and drink driving.
4. Do graduated driver licensing schemes reduce crashes?

GLS were first developed during the 1970s in the US but it was not until 1987 that New Zealand became the first licensing jurisdiction in the world to adopt an extended GLS that now includes both night-time driving restrictions and passenger restrictions. Since then, GLS have spread widely in the US, Europe and Australia and this spread has been accompanied by many evaluations of the subsequent safety benefits.

A formal meta-evaluation of GLS concluded that the approach is effective in reducing crash rates and injuries for young drivers but the reviewers were unable to quantify the reductions with confidence. Given that the different schemes vary widely especially in the nature of restrictions, it is not surprising that the subsequent crash benefits show wide variation – with estimated reductions in young driver crashes ranging between 4 and 60 percent. One of the most reputable overviews of GLS estimated that on balance, GLS reduced all young driver crashes by 7 percent and injury crashes by 9 percent. It was also estimated that night time restrictions reduced young driver injury crashes in the curfew period by a substantial 36 percent. Other evaluators have concluded that the individual driving restrictions which show the strongest associations with crash reductions are:

- increasing the duration of the minimum Learner period, which subsequently increases on-road supervised driving experience – with 120 hours of supervised driving seen as a desirable level;
- night-time driving restrictions for Provisional drivers;
- peer-passenger restrictions for Provisional driver drivers;
- mandating a zero BAC limit for both Learner and Provisional drivers; and
- mandating seat-belt use at all times for both Learner and Provisional drivers (in those overseas jurisdictions where seat-belt use is not mandatory).


5. Some disadvantages of graduated driver licensing schemes

While it is widely accepted that GLS have an important role to play in reducing young driver crashes, the schemes also have some disadvantages. The delay in young people becoming independent drivers, while having safety benefits, may mean a longer dependence on parents and others for transport. The extended practice required during the Learner period may be an undue hardship for some parents, who need either to pay for professional driving instruction or to spend more time supervising their children’s driving. Further, young people living away from home or otherwise independent of parents or guardians, may have limited access to supervising drivers and vehicles. At least some of the restrictions during the Provisional phase can also threaten young people’s mobility – especially the restrictions on peer passengers and night time driving. These considerations particularly affect young people in rural areas, where alternative transport options are much more limited.

While licensing authorities recognise some of the hardships caused by GLS restrictions and allow for exemptions, it remains that more exemptions mean less the safety benefits.

6. Novice driver licensing provisions in Western Australia

In Western Australia and under the current provisions of the GDT&L structure, anyone seeking to obtain a light passenger vehicle driving licence for the first time must now take three main steps.
The first step is to get and then satisfy the requirements of the Learner permit. The key requirements for almost all applicants are:

- the Learner driver must be at least 16 years of age;
- the Learner driver must initially pass a computerised knowledge test of road rules and safe driving practices;
- having passed the test, the Learner undertakes on-road driving, supervised by a qualified driver;
- once reaching at least 16 years and 6 months of age, the Learner sits for a practical driving assessment;
- having passed the assessment, the Learner undertakes at least a further 25 hours of supervised driving for at least the next six months; and
- he or she is then eligible to sit for a hazard perception test.

Having passed the hazard perception test, the driver (now aged at least 17 years) is able to undertake the second step: obtaining a Provisional licence. The Provisional driver is free to drive unsupervised, subject to the following restrictions:

- for the first 6 months only, cannot drive between midnight and 5am;
- must display ‘P’ plates for all of the Provisional stage (almost always, of two years duration) – red ‘P’ plates during the first 6 months and green ‘P’ plates for the next 18 months; and
- must have a zero blood alcohol level for all of the Provisional stage (as is also the case for Learner drivers).

The third phase is reached after driving safely under Provisional licence conditions, when the driver proceeds to full licensing.

A further change to these provisions has been signalled. From a time yet to be specified, there will be reductions in the number of demerit points novice drivers can accrue before being disqualified from driving. Under the new laws the following conditions will apply:

- if a driver with less than a year’s driving experience gains a total of four or more demerit points, he or she will be disqualified from driving for a period of three months;
- if a driver with between one and two years’ driving experience gains a total of eight or more points, he or she will be disqualified from driving for a period of three months.

Further details of Western Australia’s GDT&L scheme can be found at:

7. Summary and conclusions

Young drivers have long posed a major challenge to road safety authorities. Findings from around the world show that young drivers are over-represented in crashes - and that this over-representation is highest immediately after acquiring a licence for unsupervised driving. GLS represent a key strategy in improving young driver safety by lengthening the learning process, by promoting more, and more varied, driving experiences during the Learner stage and by providing a staged exposure to the full range of driving risks. Evaluation studies have consistently shown crash reductions associated with GLS, with the safety benefits dependant upon the range of restrictions during the early licensing stages.
While Western Australia’s GDT&L scheme contains a number of proven restrictions, research evidence suggests that it would be strengthened by some additional components – especially increased hours of supervised driving during the Learner period and stronger night-time driving restrictions and peer-passenger restrictions for Provisional drivers.

8. References


Acknowledgement

This fact sheet has been produced with funding from the Road Safety Council in the interest of saving lives on our roads.

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