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‘The program was the solution to the problem’: Process evaluation of a multi-site driver licensing program in remote communities

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The low level of licenced drivers in remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory (NT) Australia constitutes a risk factor for transport injury, high incarceration rates, and reduced ability to access employment and health services. The DriveSafe NT Remote program was implemented by the NT Government to increase driver licensing in remote communities. This evaluation reviews the program delivery, acceptability, implementation challenges and licensing outcomes.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach was used, incorporating program observation and key informant perspectives ($n=30$). Program data (collected April 2012 to June 2014) and de-identified licensing data from the NT Motor Vehicle Registry were analysed for trends in service delivery and licensing rates pre and post-program.

Results: Interviewees reported strong support for the program, and regarded the program as highly engaging and acceptable. There was a greater increase in new licences at intervention sites (Learner 24% and Open licence 18%) compared with other remote areas (Learner licence 13% and Open licence 8%). There appeared to be a dose response relationship with greater licence outcomes at communities that received higher levels of program delivery.

Discussion: DriveSafe NT Remote is a Government delivered program providing licensing services to Aboriginal clients in remote Northern Territory communities, and is increasing driver licensing rates. The flexible delivery and culturally responsive approach should lead to further positive licensing outcomes. Addressing barriers to licence participation faced by Aboriginal people is an innovative approach to reducing transport disadvantage and positively impacting health and well-being in remote communities. This evaluation demonstrates a pragmatic approach to assessing program implementation of a multi-site community-based program in a vulnerable and underserved population; it is anticipated this approach could be applied to other settings to ensure programs responsively address road safety in Aboriginal populations.

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1. Introduction

Transport is essential to maintain employment, attend education, socialise and access healthcare. Transport disadvantage results from persistent difficulties accessing public transport, inability to maintain private transport and difficulties meeting transport costs, with far reaching impacts on individual and community health and well-being (Currie and Senbergs, 2007; Rosier and McDonald, 2011). Reduced licence participation in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities contributes to transport disadvantage, higher rates of transport-related morbidity and mortality and is a barrier to economic participation, social inclusion, health and well-being (Elliot and Shanahan Research, 2008; Helps et al., 2008; Ivers et al., 2016, 2011). The Northern Territory (NT) has the highest rate of road transport-related injury of any jurisdiction in Australia, and the Aboriginal population of the NT has a fatality rate due to road transportation more than double the rest of the NT population (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2012, p. 24). This has been attributed to known risk factors for transport-related injury in Aboriginal communities: remoteness, non-use of seatbelts, alcohol use and vehicle overcrowding (Clapham

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et al., 2008; Henley and Harrison, 2013). Unlicensed driving is also common, due to the vastness of the region and poor access to licensing services. As a result of not having a licence while living in a remote area with little public transport, people are more inclined to make unsafe driving choices or engage in illegal driving practices (Job and Bin-Sallik, 2013).

Low rates of licensing in communities also contributes to an over-represented Aboriginal prison population due to a high number of repeat licence offences and difficulty accessing employment and developmental opportunities (Job and Bin-Sallik, 2013; Somssich, 2009). Across Australia, the NT recorded the highest imprisonment rate at 885 prisoners per 100,000 adult population in 2015 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners made up 84% of the prison population, despite comprising only 32% of the NT population (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2015). The rate of incarceration for vehicle regulatory and driving offences is 25% of NT prisoners, of which approximately 97% are Aboriginal (Anthony and Blagg, 2012).

Several reports have highlighted the complex range of barriers that contribute to the high rate of unlicensed drivers in remote Aboriginal communities: a lack of appropriate identification documentation (birth certificates), limited access to licensing and testing facilities, low levels of literacy, lack of self-esteem, high cost of driving lessons, poor access to eligible supervisory drivers for learners, language barriers, reduced availability of licensing services, a lack of access to appropriate vehicles, a general culture of being unlicensed and unsafe driving practices (Elliot and Shanahan Research, 2008; Helps et al., 2008; Job and Bin-Sallik, 2013).

The DriveSafe NT Remote program was implemented by the NT Government to address barriers to licensing faced by remote communities. Similar programs have been developed and implemented previously, yet many have proved unsustainable due to inadequate funding and an inability to demonstrate outcomes. Hence, licensing support programs are under-evaluated and there is limited evidence to establish best practice for program development and implementation. This process evaluation aims to review program implementation and explore whether DriveSafe is being implemented as intended, addressing the needs of the target communities and leading to positive licensing outcomes.

2. Methods

2.1. Design

A mixed-methods approach was selected to explore informant perspectives, program delivery and licensing outcomes using de-identified licensing data for remote communities in the NT from the Motor Vehicle Registry, Northern Territory Department of Transport.

2.2. The program

The DriveSafe NT Remote program commenced in April 2012, and was sequentially rolled out across 23 communities. Prior to the delivery of the program, the DriveSafe team visited a community three times on average to conduct community consultations, promote the program and identify a host organisation. Then the program team and host organisation ensured community members have proof of identification to apply for a Learner licence. Once community members have identity documentation, DriveSafe field staff deliver the Learner theory component of the program and administer the Learner's licence theory test. The licensing process in the NT is outlined in Fig. 1.

Field staff return at regular intervals to deliver professional driving lessons. In between professional lessons, participants engaged in supervised driving practice where available with local community members who were licensed drivers. In the final stage of the program, field staff deliver road safety education, and administer the Provisional driver licence practical test. A graduation ceremony is held to present the licences.

2.3. Quantitative data sources and collection

2.3.1. Program data

Program data was routinely collected throughout delivery from April 2012 to May 2014, and was supplied to evaluators in a de-identified form. Data consisted of licensing outcomes, birth certificates obtained and professional lessons delivered. Data was reported for 15 locations: seven primary locations were excluded on the basis of incomplete data and/or where program delivery commenced in May 2014, and data for Jabiru and Gunbalanya was combined. The 15 locations are shown on a map of the NT along with Darwin and Alice Springs (Fig. 2).

Licence Class	Minimum Age	Eligibility for licence	Period of licensure
Learner licence	16 years	Pass a computer based theory test	Hold the Learner licence for 6 months
Provisional licence	16 years and 6 months	Pass a practical on road driving test	Hold the Provisional licence for 24 months if under 25 years of age Hold the Provisional licence for 12 months if over 25 years of age
Full licence	18 years and 6 months	No testing or requirements, licence is upgraded upon renewal once provisional licence period has passed	

Fig. 1. Licensing requirements, eligibility and time periods in the Northern Territory, Australia.

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