



# The extent and characteristics of driving anxiety

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 20 July 2017

Received in revised form 28 May 2018

Accepted 29 May 2018

### Keywords:

Driving anxiety

Fear

Avoidance

Cognitions

Population

## ABSTRACT

Research over the last two decades has resulted in improved understandings of the nature and characteristics of driving anxiety. However, we still do not know the extent of driving anxiety in the general population, as most studies have focused on clinical or vehicle accident samples, and the only population study is of older adults. The present study addressed this gap in knowledge using data from 441 people who responded to a survey sent to a random sample of 1500 adults recruited from the compulsory voting register in New Zealand. While 31% reported no driving anxiety, 52% endorsed mild driving anxiety and 16% reported moderate to severe driving anxiety. There were small but significant differences in the average age at which participants in these three groups started to learn to drive, but there were no differences in driving-related accidents and incidents over the past 12 months. Those with higher driving anxiety endorsed more anxiety about road rage, lower feelings of safety while driving, and more driving-related avoidance and negative cognitions than the less anxious participants. However, levels of helpseeking were low, and suggest the need to develop online self-help packages that are more accessible and acceptable to those experiencing driving anxiety.

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## 1. Introduction

Our understanding of driving-related anxiety and fear has developed substantially in the past 20 years. Early research focused almost exclusively on the effect of motor vehicle crashes on subsequent experiences of post-traumatic stress disorder as well as driving anxiety, fear, and phobia (e.g., Blanchard & Hickling, 2004; Taylor & Koch, 1995). We now know that driving anxiety and fear are not solely the domain of post-crash psychological phenomena, and a series of studies have demonstrated the nature and characteristics of driving fear and phobia in general community samples of people who identify themselves as having some degree of driving fear, not necessarily related to a motor vehicle crash (Ehlers, Hofmann, Herda, & Roth, 1994; Mathew, Weinman, Semchuk, & Levin, 1982; Munjack, 1984; Taylor & Deane, 1999, 2000; Taylor, Deane, & Podd, 2007a).

These studies have established the complexity of driving anxiety and fear in terms of several factors such as the degree of anxiety and avoidance behaviour, range of fear content, and impact on functioning (for a review, see Taylor, Deane, & Podd, 2002). People can experience anxiety only in specific driving situations or circumstances, such as certain weather or traffic conditions, or their anxiety may be a part of a wider pattern of agoraphobic or trauma-related avoidance. Some describe mild anxiety or a reluctance to drive, while others report complete avoidance of driving and/or riding in a vehicle, and many others are somewhere in between those extremes. The content of what is feared can be very specific for some (e.g., fear

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of having an accident, getting stuck in traffic, other people criticising their driving), but for others can feature a mix of these cognitions that would usually distinguish different types of anxiety (Ehlers et al., 1994; Taylor, Deane, & Podd, 2000; Taylor et al., 2007a).

There has been increasing attention to whether fear and anxiety while driving affect road safety. Some research has found increased errors in an on-road driving assessment for those with driving fear compared to controls, despite no differences in crash involvement (Taylor, Deane, & Podd, 2007b). However, a study in Norway with 4448 crash-involved drivers reported that the highest risk was associated with self-reported anxiety (experienced at least once a week: odds ratio = 3.15; Sagberg, 2006). Anxious driving behaviours have been identified as occurring within three main domains, including exaggerated safety or caution behaviours (e.g., excessive following distances or driving well below the speed limit), anxiety-based performance deficits (e.g., using the incorrect lane), and hostile/aggressive driving behaviours (e.g., yelling, honking; Clapp et al., 2011a, 2011b). Stress history has been proposed as important in conferring risk for anxious driving behaviour (Clapp et al., 2011b), while others have found higher crash rates and DUI episodes amongst people with high general anxiety (rather than driving-related anxiety specifically) compared with those with low or medium levels of anxiety (Dula, Adams, Meisner, & Leonard, 2010).

Despite this improved fund of knowledge, we still do not know the extent of driving anxiety and how many people it affects. Studies on driving and accident phobia in crash victims are useful to some degree, but the experience of driving anxiety is not always related to a crash or near-miss (e.g., Clapp et al., 2011b), so this body of work cannot address the question of the scope of driving anxiety in the population. A small study of a convenience community sample of 100 people in New Zealand found overall low levels of driving anxiety, with a small group of 8% reporting moderate to extreme driving anxiety and 51% endorsing mild anxiety (Taylor & Paki, 2008). The only published study that has used a representative sample comes from the New Zealand Longitudinal Study of Ageing, and the data was based on a cohort of 2491 young older adults aged 55–72 years (Taylor, Alpass, Stephens, & Towers, 2011). Most (90%) of the cohort described themselves as drivers who drove daily or weekly, and 69% reported no anxiety about driving (i.e., a rating of 0 on a 0–10 scale). However, 20% endorsed mild driving anxiety (i.e., ratings of 2–4), and 5.5% reported moderate to severe levels of driving anxiety (i.e., ratings of 5–10; Taylor et al., 2011). Self-reported driving anxiety was higher for women than men, and 2.4% reported that their driving anxiety had affected their usual activities or work for at least a day a month. This impact on functioning was significant for a small group of 10 participants whose driving anxiety affected their usual activities for at least 20 days in the previous month, and nearly 28% of those with moderate to severe driving anxiety had stopped driving (Taylor et al., 2011). In a study of 50 women with driving fear, 28% reported that their fear often interfered with things they wanted to do and 18% said that this occurred all the time (Taylor et al., 2007a). These findings illustrate that driving anxiety can impact on mobility and everyday functioning as well as potentially affecting safety on the road.

While Taylor et al.'s (2011) study provides useful information about driving anxiety in young older adults, the extent of driving anxiety more broadly remains unknown. This study aimed to address this gap in the literature. In addition, the study aimed to examine whether there were any aspects of driving history or demographic factors that differentiated those with and without driving anxiety and fear, as well as the degree of avoidance behaviour and negative driving-related cognitions.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

In 2012, a random sample of 1500 adults were recruited for the study from New Zealand's electoral roll, a compulsory voting register of adults over 18 years of age that currently represents 98% of the population. Participants were invited to complete a postal survey which used a two-stage posting schedule where the survey was mailed out, and then another survey mailed to non-responders. Of the 1500 participants randomly selected, 441 (29.4%) responded to the survey. Participants ranged from 18 to 87 years of age, the average age was 54 years ( $SD = 17$ ), and 44% were men. This group was similar to the original random sample of 1500 which comprised 47.5% men ranging in age from 18 to 96, although the average age in the original sample was slightly younger (49 years). Most (88%) participants were of European descent and 5% were Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand). There were 51% of the sample who had a post-secondary or tertiary qualification.

### 2.2. Measures and procedure

Ethical approval was obtained by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee (HEC: Southern B 10/75). Participants completed a 14-page postal survey comprised of demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity, and education), driving information, driving fear information, and several psychometric instruments, including the Driving Situations Questionnaire, Driving Cognitions Questionnaire, Driving and Riding Avoidance Scale, Driving Behaviour Survey, and Driver Social Desirability Scale.

#### 2.2.1. Driving information

Participants were asked about aspects of their driving histories that might be relevant to driving fear. Questions were primarily of a multiple-response format. Participants were asked their age when they started to learn to drive, how they learnt

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