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# "*You're so used to having someone tell you what to do*": Experiences of young drivers during the provisional licence phase

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ABSTRACT

*Objective:* Young drivers are at considerable risk of injury and fatality during the earliest years of independent driving (provisional/intermediate/restricted/probationary licence). Interventions such as graduated driver licensing (GDL) are designed to ameliorate this risk by allowing young drivers to gain on-road driving experience under conditions of reduced risk (eg., night-time passenger restrictions in Queensland, Australia). Consistent with systems thinking, to maximise the effectiveness of interventions such as GDL it is essential that experiences of young drivers is understood. The aim of the research is to explore the experiences of young drivers with a provisional driver's licence, within the current young driver road safety system in Queensland.

*Methods:* Thirty-four drivers (17–18 years; mean = 17.6, mode = 17, 14 males) with a provisional licence attending two high schools (one public, $n = 21$, 9 males; one private) participated in a 45-minute group discussion during the school day.

*Results:* Two themes emerged: (1) independence and (2) driving logistics. A wealth of experiences and advice pertaining to the sub-themes of psychosocial independence, transportation independence, driving skills and knowledge, interacting with other drivers, driving mistakes, and owning a vehicle were shared by young drivers. Numerous recommendations are made pertaining to each sub-theme, such as informing young drivers of the expense associated with independent mobility, effectively managing a road crash, and interacting safely with other drivers now there is no longer a driving supervisor sharing the journey with them.

*Conclusions:* Importantly these findings apply to young drivers in all motorised jurisdictions, irrespective of whether they have implemented a graduated driver licensing program. The breadth of experiences – many of which placed the young driver at increased risk of harm – shared by the young drivers should be considered in refining the content and process not only of any novice licence phase during which independent driving occurs, such as the provisional phase, but also of the preceding learning-to-drive licence phase. To illustrate, greater exposure to driving hazards like driving with peer passengers and sharing the road with larger vehicles can be undertaken in circumstances of increased driving 'independence' (that is, under less direction) during the final stages of the learner licence. This pseudo-independent driving is an opportunity to develop skills and capabilities in the

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potentially-risky circumstances which the novice will soon traverse without a supervisor's support.



## 1. Introduction

The persistent overrepresentation of young drivers in road crash fatalities is universally-recognised, with road injury the most common cause of death, and the second most common cause of disability-adjusted life years lost, for male and female adolescents alike (World Health Organization, 2014). In Queensland, Australia, 11.8% of fatalities for the year to date to 30 April 2016 involved a driver aged 17–20 years (Transport and Main Roads (TMR), 2016), despite these drivers contributing only 6.1% of the licensed driving population (Transport, 2015). The great risks associated with the earliest years of independent driving – that is, novice drivers who have entered the provisional (restricted/ intermediate) licence phase – are also well-recognised. To demonstrate, in Queensland in the same period, 11.8% of road fatalities arose from a crash involving a driver with a provisional licence (Transport, 2016), despite these drivers contributing only 5.9% of the licensed driving population (TMR, 2015).

A variety of interventions, typically framed within the four E's of education, engineering, enforcement, and exposure-control, have been introduced in motorised jurisdictions. In July 2007 the graduated driver licensing (GDL) program in Queensland was significantly revised (see Scott-Parker et al., 2011). In addition to a breadth of learner practice conditions (including 100-hours supervised practice certified in a logbook which is examined for accuracy and completeness prior to undertaking the practical driving assessment), numerous driving conditions for the young provisional driver including the implementation of a multi-stage licence period (provisional 1 (P1) minimum 12 months' duration; provisional 2 (P2) of 24 months' duration; completion of hazard perception test to progress from P1 to P2) were also introduced. Driving restrictions principally relate to the night-time carriage of passengers (P1), high-powered vehicles (P1, P2), and the use of mobile (cell) phones (P1) (Transport, 2014a). Evaluations of the GDL programs in a number of jurisdictions including New Zealand (eg., Begg, Stephenson, Alsop, & Langley, 2001; Lewis-Evans, 2010); Canada and the United States (eg., Fell, Jones, Romano, & Voas, 2011; Mayhew, Simpson, Singhal, & Desmond, 2006; Shope, 2007; Shope & Molnar, 2003; Vanlaar et al., 2009) have revealed that stronger GDL programs, such as those programs which incorporate longer learner periods and night time driving conditions and/or restrictions during the provisional phase, are one of the most effective interventions in young driver road safety.

In addition to GDL evaluations which focus on changes in crash, injury and fatality rates, research has also examined the young driver's experiences within the GDL program for their jurisdiction. Attitudes towards GDL have been investigated, with early (eg., Begg, Langley, Reeder, & Chalmers, 1995) and more recent research (eg., Brookland & Begg, 2011) indicating that young drivers generally view GDL conditions and restrictions favourably. Self-reported driving behaviours undertaken during the learner licence phase has been explored, with a breadth of driving practice reported in jurisdictions such as Queensland (Scott-Parker et al., 2011) and New South Wales (Bates, Watson, & King, 2010). Self-reported driving behaviours undertaken during the provisional licence phase has also been investigated, and compliance with GDL restrictions, and general road rules, during this risky driving phase has received particular attention. Young drivers commonly report risky behaviours such as driving with multiple passengers, and driving in excess of posted speed limits (eg., Ivers et al., 2009; Scott-Parker, Watson, King, & Hyde, 2012a). Young drivers also report violating GDL restrictions such as night-time and passenger limits (eg., Goodwin & Foss, 2004; Scott-Parker et al., 2012a). Perhaps unsurprisingly, young learner drivers who report the least support for GDL conditions and restrictions engage in the most risky driving as independent drivers (Brookland & Begg, 2011).

Improving compliance with GDL and road rules is essential if young novice drivers in particular, and all road users in general, are to benefit from these conditions (Williams, 2011). Potential avenues of improving compliance with GDL include greater visibility of on-road enforcement, engaging with both the young driver and their parents (eg., Goodwin, Wells, Foss, & Williams, 2006), and ensuring stronger GDL programs are operationalised (see also Foss & Goodwin, 2003). Moreover, some jurisdictions have introduced additional legislation to strengthen the existing GDL (Traffic Tech, 2007), an acceptable and effective alternative to directly modifying the existing GDL program (Williams, 2011). Notwithstanding the need to improve compliance with, and to strengthen, GDL programs, the continued overrepresentation of young drivers in road crashes suggests that the current intervention approach could be enhanced. Intervention efforts such as GDL attempt to 'fix the driver', exemplified by mandating minimum practice requirements in the learner licence phase, then mandating driving conditions and restrictions in the provisional licence phase. An alternative approach utilises systems thinking, an approach which is underpinned by the notion that safety, and conversely non-safety (ie., crashes), emerges from the interactions of a breadth of individuals, including the young driver, stakeholders, and objects across the overall young driver road safety system which comprises many levels (eg., Leveson, 2004). In this way, behaviour within the system is influenced by decisions and actions across all levels of this system. Scott-Parker et al. (2015, 2016) described the young driver road safety system in Queensland using Rasmussen's (1997) risk management framework (RMF):