



# The psychosocial purpose of driving and its relationship with the risky driving behaviour of young novice drivers



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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The overrepresentation of young drivers in road crashes, injuries and fatalities around the world has resulted in a breadth of injury prevention efforts including education, enforcement, engineering, and exposure control. Despite multifaceted intervention, the young driver problem remains a challenge for injury prevention researchers, practitioners and policy-makers. The intractable nature of young driver crash risks suggests that a deeper understanding of their car use – that is, the *purpose* of their driving – is required to inform the design of more effective young driver countermeasures.

**Aims:** This research examined the driving purpose reported by young drivers, including the relationship with self-reported risky driving behaviours including offences.

**Methods:** Young drivers with a Learner or Provisional licence participated in three online surveys ( $N_1 = 656$ , 17–20 years;  $N_2 = 1051$ , 17–20 years;  $N_3 = 351$ , 17–21 years) as part of a larger state-wide project in Queensland, Australia.

**Results:** A driving purpose scale was developed (the PsychoSocial Purpose Driving Scale, PSPDS), revealing that young drivers drove for psychosocial reasons such as for a sense of freedom and to feel independent. Drivers who reported the greatest psychosocial purpose for driving were more likely to be male and to report more risky driving behaviours such as speeding. Drivers who deliberately avoided on-road police presence and reported a prior driving-related offence had significantly greater PSPDS scores, and higher reporting of psychosocial driving purposes was found over time as drivers transitioned from the supervised Learner licence phase to the independent Provisional (intermediate) licence phase.

**Discussion and conclusions:** The psychosocial needs met by driving suggest that effective intervention to prevent young driver injury requires further consideration of their driving purpose. Enforcement, education, and engineering efforts which consider the psychosocial purpose of the driving are likely to be more efficacious than those which presently do not. Road safety countermeasures could reduce the young driver's exposure to risk through such mechanisms as encouraging the use of public transport.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The young driver problem

The considerably increased risk of injury (fatal and non-fatal) through road crashes experienced by all young drivers has been recognised for decades as the young driver problem. Road crashes are the leading cause of death for persons aged 16–25 years (e.g., OECD., 2006; World Health Organization., 2014) and the second most common cause of disability for male and female adolescents alike (World Health Organization, 2014). In Australia in 2013, young drivers aged 17–25 years contributed 21.3% of the fatally-injured drivers (BITRE (Bureau of Infrastructure & Regional Economics), 2014), with life-threatening injuries sustained from crashes in particular continuing to climb in recent years (Henley & Harrison, 2012). In the Australian state of Queensland in 2013, 35.0% of hospitalised casualties arose from a crash involving a driver aged 17–24 years. In Queensland in the year to 30 September 2014, 21.8% of fatalities of all road users involved a young driver aged 17–24 years (TMR (Transport, 2014)). In addition, risks are greatest for the newly-licensed young driver, with 0.6% of fatalities involving a driver with a Learner licence, in comparison to 8.8% of fatalities involving a driver with a Provisional (intermediate) licence (TMR (Transport, 2014)), despite these driver's accounting for 5.2% and 5.3% of the state's licensed population, respectively (TMR (Transport, 2013)). In addition, it is also noteworthy that young drivers aged 17–24 years comprise only 12.9% of Queensland's licensed driving population (TMR (Transport, 2013)). Accordingly, much research focus has been directed towards understanding the influential factors in young driver road safety, particularly the on-road driving behaviour (e.g., distracted driving, Westlake & Boyle, 2012) and driving-related attitudes and beliefs (e.g., Fernandes, Hatfield, & Job, 2010) of the newly-licensed young driver. One aspect of their on-road driving behaviour which has received some research attention pertains to the purpose of their driving.

### 1.2. The purpose of driving

Driving serves many purposes. At its most fundamental level, driving a motor vehicle is a reliable, efficient and economical mode of transport. Notwithstanding infrastructure limitations and variable traffic demands, driving is also relatively flexible and can serve many purposes, readily meeting the needs associated with family, leisure, education, and employment in single and/or multiple-purpose trips (Hanson, 1980). Understanding trip purpose is essential to promote the use of public transportation methods like trains, buses and ferries; to minimise the negative environmental impact of traffic congestion (e.g., Curtis & Headicar, 1997); and to facilitate social inclusion (e.g., Hamilton & Jenkins, 2000). Driving purpose in relation to traffic offences (e.g., driving for leisure associated with increased likelihood of speeding, Tseng, 2013) has received some attention, whilst the trip purposes of other modes of road transport, such as riding a motorcycle, are also of interest (e.g., Huang & Preston, 2004). Similarly, the psychological dis/benefits of driving and using public transport (e.g., Stradling, Meadows, & Beatty, 1998) have been examined. A comprehensive understanding of driving purpose and how it relates to risky driving would contribute to more effective interventions to address young driver road safety. Accordingly considering the goal and context of the driving is vital for intervening effectively in young driver road safety (Berg, 2006).

Whilst many factors have been found to be associated with the risky behaviour of young drivers (e.g., sensation seeking propensity, Jonah, 1997), particularly relevant to young drivers is the psychosocial maturation associated with the development of their identity as a driver (e.g., Redshaw, 2006; Scott-Parker, submitted for publication). Indeed, the car can be an extension of the driver themselves, used as a form of self-expression by the young driver during their driving journeys (e.g., OECD, 2006). Consistent with this notion, quantitative and qualitative research alike repeatedly demonstrates that driving serves an important psychosocial function for the young person, such as facilitating time spent with friends (e.g., carrying them as passengers, travelling to their homes or other social outings) (e.g., Christmas, 2007; Moller & Gregersen, 2008; Moller & Sigurdardottir, 2009). More broadly, young driver lifestyle characteristics have also been found to relate to their driving style (e.g., see Gregersen & Berg, 1994; Moller, 2004; Moller & Hausteine, 2013). For example, a lifestyle characterised by behaviours such as consuming alcohol and/or illicit drugs has been found to be associated with higher crash risk, compared to a lifestyle characterised by engagement in/awareness of religious matters which has been found to be associated with a lower crash risk (e.g., Chliaoutakis, Koukoulis, Lajunen, & Tzamalouka, 2005). The different purposes of driving across the lifespan have also been identified. For example, a Finnish study revealed that driving 'just for fun' accounted for approximately one quarter of driving by young males, and one fifth of driving by females aged 18–21 years, however it accounted for less than 10% of the driving of drivers aged 25–59 years old (Laapotti et al., 2006).

Importantly, the psychosocial function of driving has been found to be related to self-reported risky driving behaviour, such that young drivers who used driving to gain social status and, relatedly, to spend time driving with their friends, reported engaging in more risky driving behaviours including speeding and tailgating (Moller & Gregersen, 2008). Presence of young passengers is particularly of interest in young driver road safety, as a New Zealand study concluded that the number of passengers was the most significant predictor of young driver crashes after controlling for gender, blood alcohol concentration, mileage, fatigue, and time of day (Keall, Frith, & Patterson, 2004). Furthermore, young drivers are more likely to carry peer-aged passengers than older drivers (e.g., Laapotti et al., 2006). Driving 'for excitement' has also been found to be associated with traffic offences and increased risk of injury for young drivers aged 16–24 years (e.g., Blows, Ameratunga, Ivers, Lo, & Norton, 2005). An analysis of coronial reports pertaining to young driver fatal crashes found social

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