



NZTA research summary

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Differences in drivers accessing and progressing through the graduated driver licensing system

A study into the factors that delay or prevent progress through New Zealand's graduated driver licensing system (GDLS) has found that anxiety is now a key barrier for novice drivers, along with the more traditional barriers of costs and access.

Almost one-third of drivers become 'stuck'

New Zealand has had a three-stage GDLS since 1988. Under the system, prospective drivers must first get a learner and then a restricted licence, before they progress to their full licence.

GDLSs are a well-proven way to improve novice driver safety. Australia, the United States, Northern Ireland and Canada also have a GDLS – yet as is the case in New Zealand, these countries are finding that young people's engagement with the licensing system and driving in general, is declining.

In New Zealand, three in ten novice drivers either become stuck on a learner or restricted licence, or are slow to progress to their full licence. This is concerning given that progressing through the licensing system at a normal pace has been shown to have safety benefits. Acquiring a licence also improves access to employment, education and health services, and enables better connections with friends and family.

To better understand both how to unlock these benefits, and what the barriers to 'normal' progress are, the study examined New Zealand data on the GDLS and novice drivers, reviewed international moves to support novice drivers, and captured insights from a national survey of 12,740 novice drivers and 86 non-licensed people of driving age.

The main barriers to engagement and progress

A critical new challenge to emerge was anxiety, with many survey respondents reporting anxiety as a key barrier to gaining a full driver's licence.

This anxiety related not only to the driving test, but also to learning to drive and the driving task itself, and included higher levels of anxiety around driving for those living with a disability.

Other better-known barriers related to the cost of driving (car ownership and licence costs) and limited access to the means to learn (to a car, an instructor and testing stations).

The study also identified the 10 characteristics of people who are having the most difficulty accessing or progressing through the GDLS, and hence the 10 key groups that would benefit most from support. These are:

- Māori
- Pasifika
- female
- anxious about driving
- over 25 years of age
- unemployed
- lower education levels
- less financially stable
- living with a disability
- have children.

Among those not accessing the GDLS at all, around 90% stated they did need to drive. Most of these drivers (around 60%) also indicated that there were trips they need to make, but find difficult to do so without a licence, such as to the supermarket or to visit families and friends. This indicates there are health and wellbeing costs to not having or seeking access to the GDLS.

Recommendations to support novice drivers

Having identified the groups most in need in support, the study considered which initiatives and changes would

best support them to progress in a more timely fashion.

Survey respondents suggested a range of support measures, including having access to a vehicle for practice and testing, and to clear and consistent information about the GDLS and its stages.

Internationally, Australia provided the best evidence of targeted changes that were improving novice drivers' progression. These included assisting low-socioeconomic and marginalised communities to navigate the GDLS, and helping novice drivers manage challenges such as needing proof of identity, preparing for tests, funding driving lessons, accessing cars and volunteer mentors, and in some cases, addressing licensing sanctions and fines.

From this, the study made six key recommendations for better supporting people to access and progress through the GDLS.

- 1. Develop a framework** – develop a framework for delivering improvements or interventions to the GDLS, and establish minimum requirements for monitoring, evaluation, data and resource sharing.
- 2. Provide governance around solutions** – establish a group, in association with the Driver Licensing Improvement Programme Group, to enable evidence-led improvements, including dedicated support people, increased one-to-one driver-training support, easier access to trainers, and clear and consistent information.
- 3. Review increased investment** – increase resourcing to provide better support for the 10 groups identified as being in most need, and foster mechanisms to promote ongoing in-kind support (such as volunteer driver mentors).
- 4. Deliver location-based reach and capacity building** – strengthen pathways for identifying and reaching those who need more support, or targeted support (such as for Māori and Pasifika), including targeting particular locations where people are known not to be accessing or progressing through the GDLS.
- 5. Improve judicial support** – identify criteria for waiving fines and lifting driving sanctions, and trial this, including monitoring any impacts. Provide targeted support for these hard-to-reach drivers.
- 6. Improve anxiety support** – review the processes and costs associated with testing, with a view to reducing test anxiety and financial anxiety without compromising safety.



RR 722: *Differences in drivers accessing and progressing through the graduated driver licensing system in NZ*. NZ Transport Agency Waka Kotahi research report. Available at www.nzta.govt.nz/resources/research/reports/722