

## Young Drivers

In this newsletter, we focus on some of the issues of young drivers which, during recent months, has been the topic of a great deal of debate.

Young drivers are over represented in road crashes. In Queensland for example, drivers and riders aged between 17 and 19 hold only 3.5 per cent of licenses, yet were involved in 13.6 per cent of reported crashes (Travelsafe, 2003).

Over the last ten years 1,500 young people between the ages of 17 and 25 have died in road crashes in Australia. In 2003, 334 drivers or passengers of that age were killed, of whom 255, or more than 76%, were males (ATSB, 2004).

Each road death in Australia is estimated to cost \$1.7 million according to the Australian Transport Safety Bureau, and over the past ten years road deaths of young Australians have cost the community over \$2.5 billion. In 2003 it cost us over \$700 million.

Teenage years are often associated with experimentation, impulsiveness and risk taking. These traits sometimes lead young drivers to over-estimate their own abilities and underestimate the risk associated with the roads. Young drivers also often do not have the skills and judgment needed when they face risky situations. Young drivers frequently travel during the high-risk nighttime hours, often with peers in the vehicle.

Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) is a system designed to phase in young beginners to full driving privileges as they mature and develop their driving skills. Versions of graduated licensing exist in the USA, New Zealand, Australia and Canada. In Australia, GDL programs vary between states, and can involve learners logging a certain number of hours of practice prior to sitting for their test and new licensees having to display 'P' (probationary) plates.

Despite the existence of these programs however, young people continue to be killed and injured at an alarming rate.

Road safety evaluations suggest that current conventional driver training has little to offer in road safety terms other than teaching basic car control skills and little if any of an understanding of risks, risk reduction and self-awareness of real world driving.

So what can be done?

A significant difference between GDL programs in Australia and many similar programs in the USA is the presence of nighttime curfews. The debate about the need for such curfews in Australia has been intense.

There are now 37 states in the US with a curfew. They typically apply to the first 6 to 12 months of solo driving and operate during the hours of say, 10:00pm and 6:00am.

The evidence for curfews is compelling. In North Carolina for example, the introduction of a nighttime curfew has been linked with a 43 per cent reduction in nighttime crash rates (Foss, Feagnes and Rodgman, 2001).

However, there is strong opposition to curfews from some in community, particularly young people. Many perceive curfews to be an infringement on their right to travel, and fear that curfews will severely hamper their ability to work, study and socialise.

Others have pointed out potential difficulties in enforcement and administration of curfews, especially if exemptions are introduced to allow people to drive for work and study.

The case for introducing curfews in Australia is not clear cut. Ultimately, governments must weigh up the costs and benefits of such a policy, and take into account their perception of community support.

## Breaking News

- We have just upgraded and enhanced the *SaferRoads* website (and will continue to do so). Please have a look at [www.aaa.asn.au/saferroads](http://www.aaa.asn.au/saferroads) and see if you find it more friendly and useful. We would appreciate any feedback, positive or critical and also let us know what other material you would like to see, or if you have any suggestions for topics, such as the new ones we have put on about seniors, pedestrians etc. We are currently planning topics on young drivers and road funding.
- All past newsletters can now also be accessed via the website on the new Resources page.
- In the September issue of the Newsletter (#6), we mentioned the ACT Chapter of the Australasian College of Road Safety/NRMA Road Safety Trust Drugs and driving workshop being held in Canberra at the National Museum on 21 October. The presentations are now available on <http://www.transport.act.gov.au/roadtransportroadsafety/drugsanddriving.html>