

Newly arrived migrants – what are the road safety issues?

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Abstract

There is significant concern for the road safety of newly arrived people from other countries who settle in Victoria on humanitarian grounds. Most concern relates to safe driving and understanding the Victorian road system, including the licensing process.

The Transport Accident Commission (TAC) and its road safety partners including Victoria Police and VicRoads are often contacted for information or statistics relating to new arrival drivers compared to the general driving public. This is because these drivers are seen by the public as being at greater risk of crashing and greater risk of causing crashes than Australian born or those who have settled from countries with a motorised society.

A number of organisations have responded to this concern by establishing support programs, including education and on road supervised driving practice; licensing; purchasing a vehicle; and the roles of Police, the courts and the Sheriff's office.

In response to this emerging issue, the TAC and the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV) have commissioned research to develop an understanding of the road safety issues and experiences of new arrivals in the lead up to and following licensing as a Victorian driver, including participation in locally developed programs.

This paper reports on Victoria's experience in addressing actual and perceived road safety issues in emerging communities, including the findings of the research.

Introduction

Humanitarian migrants (refugees and asylum seekers) enter Australia through processes managed by the Federal Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC). The Settlement Grants Program (SGP) is a Federal Government grant program through the DIAC, which provides funding to organisations to help new arrivals settle in Australia. DIAC also funds the Adult Migrant English Program to assist newly arrived immigrants to develop basic English language skills.

According to data from the DIAC, Australia received around 13,500 refugees in 2009, comprising both onshore and offshore entrants. Each year, Victoria receives around 25 percent of the total refugee intake, or approximately 3,000 people. Humanitarian migrants accounted for 6.5 per cent of Victoria's migrant intake in 2009, with most arriving from Iraq, Burma and Afghanistan.

In the five years from July 2005 to June 2009, almost 2,000 humanitarian migrants were directly settled in regional Victoria and it is expected that this number will increase over the coming years from direct and secondary settlement as living costs in the Melbourne metropolitan area increase.

Limited public transport options and the need to obtain and keep employment require that new arrivals wish to obtain a driver licence and many new arrivals, especially those accepted under refugee/humanitarian programs, are likely to find it difficult to obtain a licence. The challenges include:

- Lack of experience in a motorised society
- Not having held a licence in their country of origin
- Limited experience with licensing systems and bureaucracies
- Language challenges in relation to dealing with the licensing authority, sitting the tests, comprehending written materials and information, etc
- The costs associated with driver licensing – especially in relation to obtaining driving lessons and obtaining supervised experience
- Access to cars and licensed supervising drivers to assist in preparing for the test and solo driving.

There are no data available in Victoria that would allow assessment of new arrival crash involvement. The Victoria Police crash report form does not include items to capture this information and there is some uncertainty about whether VicRoads licensing data might include information that could be used to identify new drivers from less-motorised countries.

Evidence from Sweden and the United Kingdom indicates that the crash risk of new arrivals, particularly those from less motorised countries, is higher than for Swedish and UK born drivers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that humanitarian migrants entering Victoria confront a number of problems relating to their mobility and safety, in addition to the broader range of settlement challenges.

Given the community concern, the anecdotal evidence and the results from the Swedish studies, the Transport Accident Commission (TAC) and the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV) have commenced a study to understand the road safety issues for newly arrived migrants.

The study involves three stages. The initial stage has focused on stakeholder consultation to understand the key issues for new arrivals and the projects developed to address these issues. A component will involve a survey to determine the driving experience of new arrivals prior to coming to Australia and since their settlement in Victoria. The survey will aim to understand crash involvement, infringements and understanding of the road safety issues such as use of child restraints. A literature review will also be undertaken to gather evidence of road safety issues faced by new arrivals and effective strategies that have been successfully implemented to inform policy and program development in Victoria.

Support Programs for New Arrivals in Victoria

Adult Multicultural Education Services (AMES) has convened a working group to address the issues faced by new arrivals, particularly those entering Victoria as humanitarian migrants. The Victorian New Migrants Driving Working Group is chaired by Victoria Police's Multicultural Advisory Unit and comprises representatives from AMES, VicRoads, the TAC, Consumer Affairs Victoria, Multicultural Commission of Victoria and the RACV. The Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Citizenship participates in meetings.

Each organisation provides support to Victorian community groups through a range of approaches that target particular issues from licensing to purchasing a vehicle to road safety and the roles of Police, the courts and the Sheriff's office as follows:

- AMES is a settlement provider funded by DIAC and other sources and conducts a range of support programs for new arrivals, including humanitarian migrants.
- The TAC established the Community Road Safety Grants program to provide community groups with opportunities to address local road safety issues within the context of the Victorian road safety strategy, *arrive alive*. In six rounds to date, 130 projects have been funded of which 28 focus on road safety for new arrivals, totalling almost \$450,000 in grants.

- The RACV, through its community grants program, has funded programs to address mobility and road safety issues for new arrivals.
- VicRoads, as the licensing authority, supports new arrivals to obtain their driver's license and offers interpretation services and is developing materials to support culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities to understand the licensing system.
- VicRoads L2P program, funded by the TAC, provides on-road supervised driving practice for disadvantaged learner drivers aged under 21 years, to enable them to acquire the mandatory 120 hours supervised driving practice to be eligible for a probationary license.
- Victoria Police Multicultural Liaison Officers are located in Police regions and provide support to CALD communities on a range of matters, road safety being just one of many.
- The Victorian Multicultural Commission conducts a grants program to fund a range of projects focussing on the CALD communities and issues.
- Consumer Affairs Victoria has developed a DVD which provides information on licensing, road safety, buying a car and the role of Police and the justice system. With support from VicRoads, the DVD will be available in eighteen community languages.
- Most Settlement Grants Program projects funded by DIAC include some form of driver education.

In several projects, funding from multiple sources has been obtained to conduct driver education programs. As at April 2009, 15 targeted new arrivals projects were operating across regional and rural Victoria, and 16 in metropolitan Melbourne. An additional 15 L2P programs were operating across the state, in which disadvantaged young refugees can participate.

Projects funded through grants programs typically include a classroom based component ranging from 2 to 11 lessons with funded or subsidised driver instructor sessions, and in some instances, on-road supervised driving practice provided by volunteer mentors, similar to the L2P program for disadvantaged young Learner drivers.

Interim Findings from the Consultation Phase

The TAC and the RACV commissioned Comspec Services Pty Ltd to consult with key stakeholders and selected TAC Community Road Safety Grants project recipients in an effort to determine current situation in relation to new arrival safety issues and programs currently operating in Victoria.

The review included consultation with the project officers responsible for a sample of selected TAC Community Road Safety Grant projects concerning new arrival issues.

Nine projects were selected by TAC/RACV for inclusion in this consultation. TAC sent each selected community group an email inviting their participation in this review. Seven of the invited recipients indicated a willingness to participate and were consequently consulted during June 2010.

An additional two projects were suggested by members of the working group (though these did not necessarily receive TAC grant funding but were involved in the development and delivery of a road safety program for this target group and therefore were believed to have valuable insight). Discussions were held with a further group that was seeking funding for a proposed project to address the needs of newly arrived migrants in their community.

The interviews were conducted following a brief review of the TAC Community Road Safety Grant applications and interim/final reports (where possible, and as provided to Comspec Service by TAC) and involved the collection of detailed information about each project and target group. The interviews sought to obtain specific information relating to the following:

- Summary of the program: including specific details of the program approach, commencement and completion dates, details of the key issues the program seeks to address.
- Primary audience/target group: including methods of participant recruitment, transportation to and from the session, level of program take-up/extent of reach given need in the community, key benefits for participants. Evidence base/model on which the program was developed: including background as to why the approach was selected, whether existing resources or program material are used to implement the program and if so what and how?
- Total cost of the program: in terms of funding source, key cost areas and challenge/benefits about sourcing funding in the future.
- Implications and limitations of the program, for the target group or in general
- Unintended consequences of the program and documentation of these
- Key areas of risk and other emerging issues including extent and evidence of risk as a driver, a passenger, a pedestrian and as public transport user.
- Sustainability and future plans for the program in terms of costs and program coordination.

Comments raised during the consultation with consulted projects are summarised as follows:

- Several programs target single mothers and women who have their learner permits and are seeking to graduate to a probationary licence.
- The programs target newly arriving migrants from a range of backgrounds; including those from Sudan (most commonly), Sierra Leone, Burma, Afghan, and Arabia. Recruitment of participants is often via case work, internal referral pathways, discussions with community leaders and advertising in local and community newspaper.
- The needs of these groups consistently relate to difficulties with mobility, transport and employment. However, the costs of licensing and learning to drive and inherent lack of road exposure and experience with the Australian road environment further inhibit licence attainment and safe driving practices.

In terms of the type of programs offered:

- Each program offers some form of education sessions (from 2-3 sessions up to 11 sessions) that are facilitated by presenters from local Victoria Police, VicRoads and RACV, with several also including representatives from the Magistrates Court, the Sheriffs' Office, Consumer Affairs Victoria, local motor mechanic shops. Each session usually runs for a couple of hours. These sessions cover a range of topics, including, though not limited to the following: Road safety and Australian Road Rules, the implications associated with following (or not following) the law, assistance with purchasing, registering and insuring a motor vehicle, key aspects of the Victorian legal system, and regulations and requirements around obtaining a learner and probationary licence.
- Most programs follow this up with the provision of professional instructor sessions (average of 5), which are either fully or partly subsidised (often depending on funding constraints), as part of the program cost. Several projects have used professional instructors from the same background as the target group themselves, noting a reduction in language barriers.
- Seven of the nine programs consulted also offer a volunteer mentoring program whereby a community volunteer is given some training to act as a supervisor driver to further increase the driving experience of the program participants once the professional instructor sessions are complete. Many projects have been successful in receiving donated vehicles, from either local car retailers or on-loan with agencies such as AMES. Several of the projects consulted are using dual-powered vehicles for the volunteer program. The amount of success with recruiting and retaining volunteers varies, though the importance of the 'fit' between the learner and the volunteer is believed to be critical.

In terms of outcomes for participants:

- The number of participants who have attended programs compared to those who have subsequently obtained their P-Plates is being explored.
- There is a general perception of benefits far greater than knowledge acquisition around road safety and obtaining a licence. Many reported general increase in life skills, particularly where intensive education sessions have been offered over a period of time. Projects consulted report increases in community connectedness of those involved, with flow-on involvement in other community programs and perceptions of feeling more accepted within their own community. Anecdotally, those consulted believe that the programs also generate a greater understanding regarding the responsibility of driving and the legalities associated with being a road user in Victoria.
- Further, it is noted that the interest in and value of such programs is strong (both from participants and those delivering the programs), with most programs indicating that the level of need within the community is much greater than the number of participants able to benefit from the funded programs.

In terms of program sustainability, the greatest costs are associated with program coordination (which are considerably greater for those models offering a volunteer mentoring program) and the costs of providing subsidised professional instruction and/or vehicle maintenance and petrol. Where programs are continuing to operate in lieu of program funding or are seeking further funding, many are considering requesting a contribution from participants to help cover the costs of professional instruction sessions and ongoing vehicle costs.

Members of the Victorian New Migrants Driving Working Group were consulted during this review. Representatives from each of the organisations were interviewed using face-to-face interviews. These interviews focussed on gaining an understanding of the new arrival strategies and programs currently conducted and planned by each organisation, and perceptions of the future needs of new arrival groups and how best to address them. While the issues and areas of need raised by members of the Working Group align with those raised during consultation with selected programs, at the time of preparing the paper, specific learnings from this consultation were yet to be summarised.

Conclusion

From a community perspective, it is evident that driver education programs are deemed an important conduit for new arrivals in terms of mobility and economic and social participation. What isn't understood is whether new arrivals to Victoria are at greater risk of crashing and if so, do such programs improve road safety for this group by means of measurable crash reduction?

Based on early review of international studies and research, it appears that the risk of involvement in a serious crash is higher for new arrivals than drivers born in a motorised country and that this is especially true for drivers from societies with low levels of motorisation. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that new arrivals in Victoria have similarly elevated risks of crash involvement.

It is imperative that further investigation into the road safety issues faced by new arrivals in Victoria be undertaken. Next phases of the study by the TAC and RACV will build data on the new arrivals' driving experience and gain an insight to effective policy and programs as reported in the literature. This will inform the development of policy and effective programs in the Victorian context.

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