

Barriers to obtaining a driver licence in regional and remote areas of Western NSW

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Abstract

This study examined factors impeding young people in Western NSW from entering the licensing system. The findings can be used to inform strategies to increase licensing rates for this population, to enable greater access to essential services and socio-cultural opportunities, while at the same time either maintaining or improving current levels of road safety for these young drivers. A mixed-method study was undertaken in 2014, involving interviews, focus groups and telephone surveys with 364 young people and 32 road safety stakeholders in Western NSW. Participants were asked for their views on the importance of young people having a driver licence and the effect of barriers to obtaining a driver licence identified in prior research. The qualitative data were thematically analysed and triangulated with descriptive statistics from the survey data to uncover key findings.

Participants reported that a driver licence provides young people with a sense of independence and facilitates access to employment, education, sport and social events. Commonly reported barriers to obtaining a licence included: the process of obtaining a learner licence; proof of identify requirements; literacy and numeracy skills; legal issues and supervised driving requirements. The study results show that barriers to licensing span structural, practical, financial, legal and attitudinal issues that need to be accounted for when designing policy initiatives to increase licensing rates, while maintaining or improving the current level of road safety.

Introduction

A diverse variety of factors can limit the ability of young people in Western NSW to obtain a driver licence. To address the barriers examined in this study, the NSW Government has commenced the challenging task of determining how licensing-related programs could be modified to increase licensing rates, while at the same time either maintaining or improving current levels of road safety for these young drivers.

The NSW Graduated Licensing Scheme (GLS) is designed to limit novice drivers' exposure to high risk driving environments until their level of experience increases. Under the NSW GLS, learner drivers under 25 years of age must complete 120 hours of supervised driving prior to undertaking the practical on-road Driving Test to progress to a provisional (P1) licence. The supervised driving component of the GLS is critical because the first 12 months of solo driving is the riskiest time for young drivers, and the amount and variety of supervised driving undertaken by a learner influences their subsequent crash risk as a provisional driver (Chen et al., 2010).

The NSW Government has also introduced two optional components in the learner stage of the GLS that influence this driving experience. Firstly, the '3 for 1' scheme, introduced in December 2009, allows learners to record one hour of lessons with a licensed professional driving instructor as three hours in their logbook, up to a maximum of 10 hours. The second optional component is the Safer Drivers Course, implemented in July 2013, which combines theoretical and practical modules for learner drivers under 25 years-old. The course consists of two modules, involving a group discussion and a two hour on-road coaching session, which aim to improve the behaviours and capabilities of young drivers. Participants gain 20 hours of credit towards their 120 hours of logged supervised driving.

The introduction of, and subsequent changes to, the GLS in NSW has coincided with a large reduction in crash rates for young drivers (NSW Auditor General, 2011). Fatal crash involvement rates for drivers under 26 years of age in NSW declined by 51 per cent from 1999-2000 to 2009-2010, compared to 35 per cent for drivers 26 years and over in the same period. Despite this success, there are concerns that the requirements and restrictions embedded within the NSW GLS may make it difficult for disadvantaged young people to enter the licensing system (NSW Auditor General, 2011).

A range of barriers that impede some young people in NSW from obtaining a driver licence have been identified in previous academic research and government reports, including accessing supervising drivers and vehicles to obtain 120 hours of logged driving practice to progress to a provisional (P1) licence (Ivers et al., 2011; NSW Auditor General, 2013). However, most research on this topic is qualitative and largely focused on barriers for Aboriginal young people, with less known about barriers for young people in regional and remote areas more broadly.

There are around 25,000 young people, 16-24 years of age, who live in Western NSW (defined in this study as being west of the Newell Highway), based on 2011 Australian Bureau of Statistics Census Data. There are a number of reasons why it is important to examine barriers to licensing for this population. Holding a licence can enhance quality of life for individuals and communities by increasing individual and community wellbeing (eg through access to greater employment and education opportunities), improving health and safety, and strengthening social networks (Helps et al., 2008). Owning a driver licence has particular benefits for people living in regional and remote areas, where there can be limited public transport and longer distances to employment, shops and essential services. The literature shows that barriers to the licensing system may be particularly significant amongst Aboriginal communities in remote areas due to several factors, including difficulties accessing proof of identity documents (Ivers et al., 2011).

In 2013, the Centre for Road Safety (CRS) within Transport for NSW (TfNSW) commissioned Urbis to undertake research to provide insights into the barriers young people in regional and remote areas of Western NSW face when accessing the licensing system, including barriers specific to Aboriginal communities. The project also investigated the implications of barriers to licensing for accessing education, employment, healthcare and life opportunities. The project findings identify opportunities to promote increased licensing rates, and are being utilised by the CRS to inform the design and implementation of policies and programs that can achieve this objective, while at the same time either maintaining or improving current levels of road safety for young drivers.

Methods

A multi-method study was undertaken, involving extensive focus groups, interviews and telephone surveys with young people and key stakeholders located in regional and remote areas of Western NSW. Details of the study methods are provided below.

Focus groups

The research focused on three main locations in Western NSW, each comprising one or more Local Government Areas (LGAs). The locations were selected to provide coverage of South-West, Far West and North-West areas of the State. Focus groups were undertaken in each location with young people aged 16-24 years to seek views on their experiences in accessing the licensing system. Focus groups were anticipated to provide a greater perspective on licensing issues than individual interviews with young people, due to the interaction between individuals and their exchange of ideas and opinions.

As listed in Table 1, a total of nine focus groups were conducted across three locations, which involved 64 participants in total. The participants represented a mix in gender and experiences with the licensing system (eg learner drivers, provisional drivers). One of the focus groups involved only Aboriginal participants. The aim was to create a comfortable environment for these participants to discuss licensing issues relevant to themselves and their peers.

Table 1: Number of focus groups and participants

Locations	Number of focus groups	Number of participants
Location 1: Bourke, Brewarrina and Walgett	3	16
Location 2: Hay and Balranald	3	24
Location 3: Broken Hill	3	24
Total	9	64

The participants were recruited through an agency with extensive expertise in recruiting research participants in regional and remote NSW. The focus groups took place in community centres and Returned Services League clubs located in each LGA. The length of each focus group was around 1-1.5 hours, and all participants were paid \$80 for their participation. A semi-structured discussion guide was used, which broadly explored barriers to the licensing system for young people. Two members of the Urbis research team, including an Aboriginal consultant, led each focus group. The focus groups took place between 31 March and 15 April 2014.

Interviews

In-depth interviews with key stakeholders located in the same research locations were also undertaken. The CRS identified a list of key stakeholders to be invited for the interviews, including representatives of government agencies (e.g. RMS), community organisations (e.g. driving schools) and educational institutions (e.g. local high schools). A total of 32 stakeholders participated in the in-depth interviews, which were undertaken between 31 March and 15 April 2014.

Urbis distributed an information sheet to each stakeholder to explain the purpose of the research, the type of questions they would be asked and a contact number for any questions. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and took approximately 30-45 minutes. A semi-structured discussion guide was developed, which explored similar issues as the focus groups.

Telephone surveys

The project also involved a quantitative telephone survey with 300 young people between 26 May and 30 June 2014 in order to quantify barriers and enablers in how young people view access to the licensing system. The survey targeted young people aged between 16-24 years and living in Western NSW, including the three research locations outlined above. A random digit dialling approach was utilised to gain access to the sample. The sample frame was all households listed in the White Pages within the predefined target areas.

A sample of 100 completed surveys in the three main research locations yielded a confidence interval of 9.69% (at 95%), with an assumed population of 4,452 young people (based on 2011 ABS Census Data). A further 200 completed surveys of participants from Western NSW beyond the main research locations reflected a confidence interval of 6.9% (at 95%). This sample was considered to be sufficiently robust for a study of this nature with this population. Demographic information related to the survey sample is outlined below in Table 2.

Table 2: Survey sample demographic information

		Total (%)
Gender	Male	46
	Female	54
Age	16	21
	17 – 19	55
	20+	24
Education (completed)	University or Trade	7
	HSC/Year 12	41
	Year 10 or less	52
Studying	Studying	72
	Not studying	28
Employment	Employed	63
	Unemployed	37
Descent	Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	7
	Non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	93

A quantitative survey instrument for the telephone interviews was collaboratively developed by Urbis and the CRS. Respondents were asked to evaluate statements, using a five-point Likert scale, regarding the importance of having a driver licence and key barriers to the licensing system that were raised in the focus groups and interviews.

Analytical methods

The Urbis research team transcribed recordings of the interviews and focus groups and collaboratively reflected on their qualitative data collection experiences and prominent themes raised. Next, thematic analysis of interview and focus group transcriptions was undertaken. Emergent issues were collaboratively categorised into themes related to the importance of having a driver licence and barriers to obtaining a driver licence. Analysis was performed at the individual participant level, with key results generated using the entire dataset, rather than specific stakeholder groups. The qualitative results were triangulated with descriptive statistics from the survey results to identify the key study findings.

The results section summarises key findings that emerged from the combination of qualitative and quantitative data, rather than providing separate results that emerged from the different sources. This allows the findings to be presented holistically to emphasise the study focal points; that is, the importance of having a driver licence and the key barriers to obtaining a licence in Western NSW.

Results

The importance of having a licence

Most young people that participated in focus groups agreed that having a licence provided them with independence and freedom, as well as sporting, social and other opportunities. Participants indicated the desire to avoid being dependent on parents or other family members or friends, and also noted that if they were able to drive they could assist these groups. These options were not always easily available to them without a driver licence. The following quote exemplifies the perceived importance of licensure for young people: *“having a licence is VERY important. It gives you independence and a sense of responsibility... you need a licence to get a life.”*

The importance of a licence for employment and further education was noted. Most focus group participants also recognised that having a licence was an indication that they had achieved a degree of responsibility and attaining their licence would allow them to undertake more adult activities such as working and caring for family members. A small number of focus group participants who were already parents themselves spoke about the need to take their children to the doctor or to childcare. However, for most participants, the most immediate priorities were being able to socialise with friends and participate in sporting activities.

Most stakeholders interviewed agreed that having a licence was an essential requirement for living in regional and remote areas because it increased access to employment opportunities. Stakeholders largely agreed with young people that not having a licence limited one's ability to travel and gain exposure to new places and experiences, in addition to education options and sporting and social opportunities. Surprisingly, some stakeholders and young people did consider that it was possible to get around their small town without a licence, lessening the urgency for a licence for some people. One interviewee stated: *"young people don't see having a licence as a priority because there is nowhere to go. Everything is in walking distance"*.

A key finding was that some of the impetus for obtaining a licence may be related to the sense of urgency a young person feels for improving or extending their own circumstances, and teenagers in comfortable situations with amenities nearby may not feel the sense of urgency or impatience that others feel. Furthermore, it is especially those who feel a sense of urgency who may be most restricted by barriers outside of their control, such as access to a competent supervising driver, access to a registered vehicle and access to money for fuel and the driver knowledge test. These barriers were consistently reported by interviewees and focus group participants to be more significant for Aboriginal young people and for people of any age in remote communities. These and other barriers to obtaining a learner and provisional licence are discussed further below.

As highlighted in Figures 1 and 2, the young people surveyed found it easier to obtain a learner licence than a provisional licence. Two thirds of young people reported it was easy to obtain a learner licence, whereas less than half reported it was easy to obtain a provisional licence.

Figure 3 shows survey participants' perspectives on the relative difficulty of different barriers to accessing a provisional P1 licence. The three barriers to obtaining a provisional P1 licence that were most commonly identified by survey participants as being difficult were: completing 120 hours of supervised driving; practicing different traffic scenarios in regional and remote NSW; and accessing a professional driving instructor. Conversely, accessing a registered car to practice driving was identified as the least difficult barrier for young people to overcome.

Figure 1: Ease of obtaining a learner licence

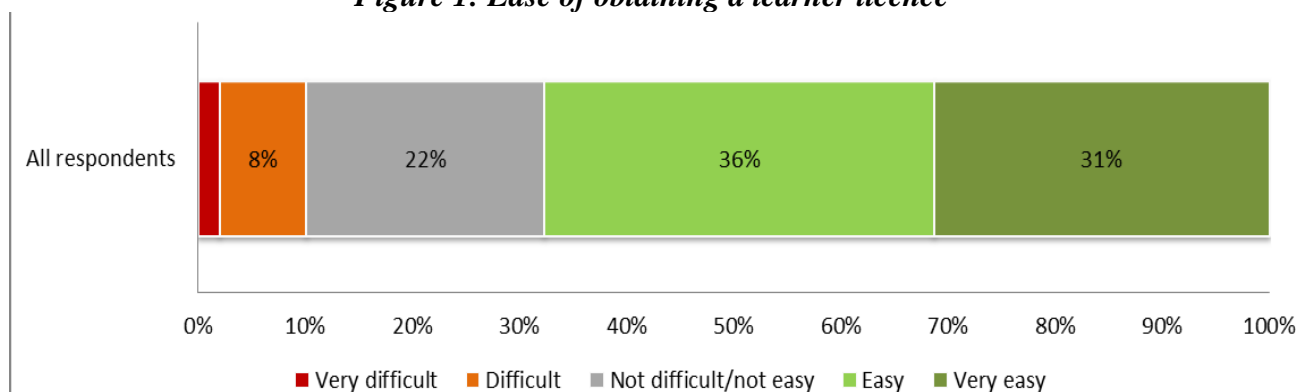
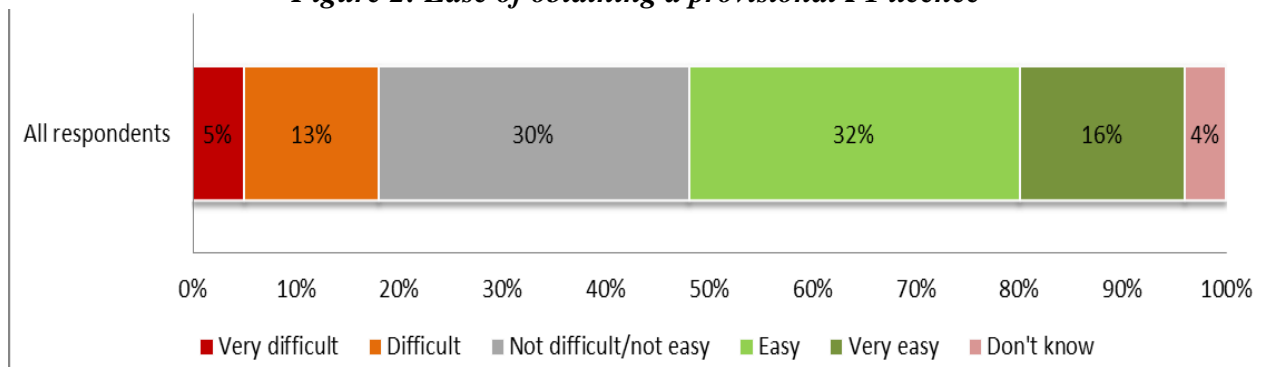
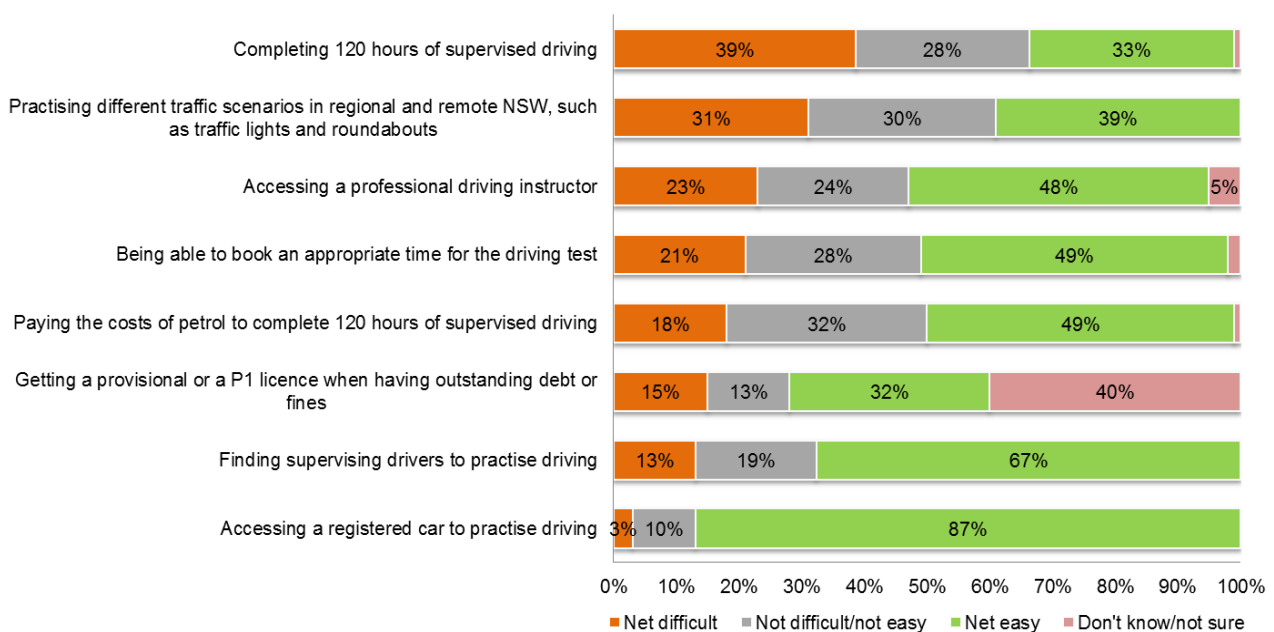


Figure 2: Ease of obtaining a provisional P1 licence**Figure 3: Barriers to obtaining a provisional P1 licence**

The process of obtaining a learner licence

The limited opening hours of RMS offices in some towns was reported as a barrier by interviewed stakeholders and young people that participated in focus groups, as this limited opportunities to take the test. Some offices were said to only open two days a week during school hours. Stakeholders often indicated that people found ways to work around this limitation, such as driving to another town where the office was open at more convenient times.

Another barrier commonly reported by focus group participants was a difficulty in getting an appointment to do the driving test at an RMS office. Around one in five survey participants also identified this as a difficult barrier to overcome. Many RMS offices only offer driver testing once a month. In some locations it was reported that these appointments were booked months in advance by people from out of town who thought it would be easier to do the test in a remote location because there were no hills, traffic lights or roundabouts (this has not been verified, however).

Proof of identity requirements

Focus group and interview participants reported it was difficult for some young people to obtain documents to prove identity which were essential for obtaining a learner licence. This was often

proposed to be a more significant barrier in Aboriginal communities where some people had not been registered at birth, or had names that were different to those written on birth certificates. The process and expense involved in obtaining these documents were seen to have deterred some young people from obtaining a licence.

Literacy and numeracy skills

Comments from stakeholders and focus group participants indicated an acknowledgement of the availability of online and hard copy licensing resources, so that young people do not have a lack of access to relevant information. The issue therefore does not appear to be availability of information, but for some people, the ability to read and comprehend adequately in order to prepare for the licensing test.

Indeed, the majority of interviewed stakeholders reported that literacy and numeracy issues were one of the biggest barriers to getting a learner licence. A number of young people that participated in focus groups noted that they found the learner driver log book too hard to read and this made it difficult to prepare for the learner licence test. For some others, a sense of bravado in scorning study may have masked difficulties or insecurities in reading and writing. Comments such as *“the book is too thick”* or that the participant did not like reading could indicate a general lack of interest in study or unidentified problems with reading and comprehension.

Focus group participants expressed a greater comfort with computer-based learning than with printed material. Almost all participants had practised with the on-line driver knowledge test, although some felt that this had not adequately prepared them for taking the actual test. However, there was not a consensus about this, with others believing that the test was easy. A few participants admitted that it was possible to pass the test once they had studied, having previously failed because they did not study.

Some stakeholders did note concerns about teenagers whose literacy was not good and who did not have adult role models with good reading skills. These young people were seen to require assistance with literacy and comprehension before they were able to take the test. It was noted by several stakeholders that for some Aboriginal young people, and also for people with a disability, they were often better able to demonstrate their comprehension orally rather than through the written test. At the same time, it was recognised that drivers needed to be able to read and understand street signs and that literacy was therefore essential for driving. Programs that assisted young people with literacy, such as Birrang or support through TAFE, were rated highly by stakeholders.

As outlined in the following quote, the notion of shame was raised by some interviewees: *“some people have come in [to RMS office] and expressed fear or shame because they can’t read properly”*. The notion of shame was also raised in another context by both young people and stakeholders as the fear of failure. This reportedly deterred young people from attempting the test the first time or going back once they had failed. The extent to which this sense of shame is related to literacy and comprehension, or simply lack of preparation for the test, is unknown.

Legal issues

A considerable barrier reported by stakeholders was unpaid fines. As exemplified by the following quote, young people could receive fines and might not be aware that these fines had been incurred and had not been paid:

“Some young people come in expecting to get a licence without knowing they have fines. The fines might be from riding a bike without a helmet. We

give them the phone number and suggest they work out a payment plan. About 20% of people that come in here would have outstanding fines.”

These fines reportedly often increase over time, with penalties for being unpaid, and young people may only realise the implications of this when they attempt to get a learner’s permit. Some focus group participants mentioned this problem as one they had experienced and indicated that it had discouraged them from trying again as they did not have the ability to pay fines.

Supervised driving requirements to obtain a provisional licence

Once these previously mentioned barriers had been overcome and young people had obtained their learner licence, an additional barrier reported by stakeholders and young focus group participants in progressing to a P1 licence included the requirement to complete 120 hours of logged driving practice. Various obstacles to gaining the required 120 hours of experience were reported by young people including: difficulty finding a licensed driver to supervise them, having access to a vehicle, having money to pay for petrol and having nowhere appropriate to drive to.

As evidence by the following quote, stakeholders reported that the biggest barrier for young people in getting their P’s was having access to a supervising driver and suitable vehicle: *“very hard...a lot of the time parents don’t have cars or licences. If you want to change the culture you need to try and get parents and young people licensed at the same time.”*

Some young focus group participants also reported that finding qualified drivers to supervise them was a challenge, as parents were often working and not available. However, only 13% of surveyed young people identified this as a difficult challenge to overcome to obtain a P1 licence. Stakeholders largely agreed that driving lessons made it much easier for young people to get their licence but were not widely available. Private lessons were also considered expensive at \$60-\$80 per hour. Most stakeholders reported that young people who faced barriers getting their licence couldn’t afford driving lessons: *“kids who come from poorer families struggled the most. You know who has a business in town because the kids have cars. Some of the other kids, their parents don’t even have cars.”*

Young focus group participants also noted the costs of driving. Some participants had parents who were able to provide these costs. In other families, paying for one’s own costs was a part of the process of growing more independent. The costs of petrol and the cost of registration were also recognised by young people, but were more often noted by stakeholders who came into contact with many more families and knew their circumstances.

Focus group and interview participants also noted the limited opportunities available for many young people to engage in incidental driving. In many of the research locations, most destinations are only a short distance away and therefore do not provide opportunities to gain much experience behind the wheel. As outlined by the following quote, young people reported that their parents or supervising drivers could be reluctant to allow them to drive for long distances because they had a lower speed limit:

“120 hours is pretty hard out here. It’s 5 minutes to get anywhere. The only time you would clock them up is to go to Dubbo but a lot of people don’t want to go to Dubbo at 80 km/h [actual learner driver speed limit in NSW is 90km/h].”

Barriers for Aboriginal young people

Most stakeholders felt that the barriers to driver licensing summarised above are experienced by all low socio-economic groups across regional and remote NSW. However, due to the disproportionately high level of disadvantage amongst Aboriginal people in these areas, it was generally acknowledged that Aboriginal young people face greater difficulty in accessing the licensing system than their non-Aboriginal peers.

Discussion

The literature regarding barriers to obtaining a driver licence in Australia has generally focused on barriers facing Aboriginal young people and employed qualitative methods. The barriers facing young people living in regional and remote areas more broadly are less well known and had not been quantified prior to this study.

The study findings show that it is important for young people in Western NSW to have a driver licence to gain independence and access to life opportunities. However, there are diverse factors that can impede young people from obtaining a licence, which span structural, practical, financial, legal and attitudinal issues. Most of the specific barriers identified, such as accessing supervising drivers and registered vehicles, have been highlighted in previous research (Helps et al., 2008; Olney., 2007). This study strengthens the existing evidence-base by demonstrating that licensing barriers faced by Aboriginal young people are also generally faced by non-Aboriginal young people in regional and remote areas of NSW, albeit in some instances to a lesser extent.

Addressing the barriers identified in this paper will require taking a systemic approach to the process by which young people learn to drive and access the licensing system. This includes, particularly, the way in which young people learn to drive. The current system relies on the capacity within the family or social network to provide individuals with tuition and support. Young people from disadvantaged families and communities often do not have access to either a competent driver who can teach them and supervise their training, or to a registered and roadworthy vehicle. In addition, the costs for fuel and for the licensing test itself are unaffordable for some. The project findings suggest some potential strategies to address these barriers, which are in many cases already being tested or piloted by TfNSW for the design and implementation of relevant programs.

First, increase access to formal driving tuition and other services for those who are not able to access tuition through their families or cannot afford to pay. Existing driver licensing access and support services programs that are funded by TfNSW, such as Birrang, are highly regarded and reportedly very successful in assisting people to achieve their driver licence. Expansion of these programs or developing other similar programs, targeted to communities and individuals in need, may help to further overcome barriers for those who are least able to access to tuition and supervising drivers, vehicles and petrol. Several stakeholders suggested that community-based volunteer driver mentor programs may also be an option, in which volunteers could provide a vehicle and supervised driving hours for those who cannot access these within their own family.

Second, increase assistance for young people with literacy and numeracy issues to assist their comprehension for the driver knowledge test. Some programs of support already exist, either through Birrang or other community programs (eg a local youth program or an Aboriginal support organisation). These could be expanded, as suits local community needs, or a small and targeted support program could be established through RMS. TfNSW is currently exploring how an existing TAFE program that aims to promote literacy skills – ‘Get Licensed, Get Legal, Get Work’ – could be more effectively utilised to facilitate increased licensure amongst Aboriginal people.

Third, increase the accessibility of RMS offices. It has been mentioned that access to RMS offices is more difficult in remote locations and, while there are clearly issues around viability of maintaining offices within regions with small populations, some consideration could be given to more flexible opening hours. It has also been noted that many Aboriginal people find RMS offices intimidating and that this may deter people from accessing the licensing system. Cultural training and greater promotion of culturally appropriate customer service is currently being actioned by RMS to help to change this perception. It will be important to ensure that such training and promotion is widely available in rural and remote NSW.

Fourth, more effectively promote options for young people to gain proof of identity documents. It has been noted that gaining proof of identity has been difficult for some young people. Despite existing efforts in this regard by a range of Government agencies, it is possible that RMS offices may be able to promote more widely the ways by which people may obtain proof of identity, and what types of identity proof are acceptable (eg Certificate of Aboriginality). It may also be possible to provide more streamlined support and assistance for people to access the appropriate authorities to obtain a birth certificate.

While TfNSW has made significant investments to increase licensing rates amongst young people in regional and remote areas of Western NSW, the results of this research indicate that further actions may well be required. Due to the prominence of young driver safety and licensing issues in media and community discourse, it is especially vital that future programs and policies are designed using an evidence-based approach (Hinchcliff et al., 2010). TfNSW is currently demonstrating this type of approach by funding research to evaluate the effectiveness and practicality of promising driver licensing and road safety pilot programs in regional and remote NSW, such as the 'Restricted P1 Provisional Licence' and the 'Driving Change Licensing Support Program'. Dissemination of the results of these evaluations to road safety stakeholders across Australia will ensure that key findings can be used to inform the development and implementation of programs nationally.

Some of the improvement options identified in this research may be more easily implemented than others, and further analysis of the costs and benefits of each will be required. However, certain barriers are intrinsic to a licensing system that largely relies on individual circumstances to support the development of driving skills. As such, a systemic approach across agencies at all levels of government, together with the private and community sectors, is required to address critical economic, literacy and social barriers faced by young people in regional and remote locations in NSW to bring about long-term change that will sustainably increase access to the licensing system.

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