

New Zealand Youth Traffic Offences and Traffic Offending: Phase 1 Data Gathering

Gerald Waters

Research Director. Researching Impaired Driving in New Zealand. Email: drinkdrive@gmail.com

Abstract

The 'New Zealand Youth Traffic Offences Project' aims to identify interventions that reduce youth traffic re-offending, improve road safety and reduce costs to the justice system by answering two research questions: Is traffic offending a leading path into the criminal justice system for young New Zealanders? And are there more effective interventions than standard penalties at reducing re-offending and improving road safety outcomes? This paper reports on Phase 1 of that project: to scope the extent of youth traffic offending, and identify the most common infringements and offences and sanctions, so as to focus further work. Government agencies collaborated to create a unique, broad brush picture of the path of youth traffic offending through the justice system from the Police Infringement Processing System database, Driver Licence Register (demerit points), Collections (fines) data and Ministry of Justice Case Management System data. Data were at a national level for youth age 14-19, from 2009-2013 (5 calendar years). The main findings of the paper were:

- Total youth traffic and non-traffic offending decreased significantly.
- The licensed youth driving population decreased by 30.4%.
- Infringements are the largest response to youth traffic offending.
- 68.3 % of all total infringements are referred to Court Collections.
- 72 % of all youth High Risk Driving Offences are Graduated Driver Licence System breaches.
- 54 % of first time, and 53 % of total, youth traffic offences were alcohol related.
- In 2009, fines totalling \$42,054,645 were referred to Collections from Police traffic infringements.

Aims and Objectives Data Gathering Phase 1

This paper reports on Phase 1 of the 'New Zealand Youth Traffic Offences and Offending Project' (the YTO project). Its purpose is to: identify relevant data sources and report on levels of youth traffic offences and offending.

Methodology

A high-level scan was undertaken of existing information and readily accessible data systems to scope the problem and identify areas for future work. Data sources were limited to: Crash Analysis System (CAS), Driver Licence Register (DLR), National Intelligence Application (NIA), Police Infringement Processing System (PIPS), and Ministry of Justice Case Management System (CMS). The stakeholder Reference Group comprised: NZ Police, Ministry of Transport, Ministry of Justice, NZ Transport Agency, Department of Corrections and New Zealand Automobile Association Research Foundation. To ensure that the YTO Project was completed within timeframe and budget, and after consultation with the Reference Group, the data was narrowed to: youth age bands (14-19, where available),

infringements and offences to identify the most common (e.g. drink-driving, licence breaches, speed, vehicle offences, dangerous driving), study period 2009-2013 (last 5 calendar years), national data.

Information Sharing and Data Limitations

The collaborative involvement and input of government organisations were vital to the project. There were two major changes to legislation in the years being reviewed and these changes need to be recognised and their impact on interpretation of trends over time should be explicitly noted when quoting the relevant data and comments. Firstly, the Learner licence age was raised, from 15 to 16 years of age, in August 2011, leading to a meaningful drop in numbers of youth licensed. These reduced numbers flow through all tables and figures and need to be acknowledged in any discussion of time trends.

Secondly, in August 2011, a new infringement offence was introduced for youth (under 20 years of age) driving with between zero and 30mcg alcohol/litre blood (0.03 BAC). Higher levels of alcohol (over 0.03 BAC) continued to attract Court penalties.

Key Findings

Total youth traffic and non-traffic offending decreased significantly from 2009-2013. The licensed youth driving population decreased by 30.4% from 2009-2013. Infringements are the largest component of the records on youth traffic offending. Graduated Driver Licence breaches account for 72 % of all youth High Risk Driving Offences for 2009-2013. 68.3 % of all total infringements are referred to Court for collection. 54 % of first time youth traffic offences 2009-2013 and 53 % of total youth traffic offences 2009-2013 are alcohol related. During the review of Court outcomes data it became apparent that a new data base was held by the 'Collections' Unit of the Ministry of Justice. This information has since been added to this paper as an addendum. The amount of monetary fines imposed for collection for Police infringements referred to Collections in 2009 was \$42,054,645. By 2014, 54% of the total monies imposed for Police referred infringements to Collections in 2009 had been paid, 41% had been remitted and 5% was still outstanding. 64 % of the total amount of monies remitted were replaced with alternative sentences. 56 % of the total amount of monies remitted were replaced with the alternative sentence of Community Work.

Discussion

This is a comprehensive review of the relevant data on youth traffic offences and offending in New Zealand over the period 2009-2013. It documents and organizes a unique and detailed set of data within the context of the relevant regulation and legislative information. The report has been able to focus on the overlapping areas of licensing, offending and offenders. This could only have been undertaken with a collaborative and supportive association with all the relevant government departments involved. This is an exhaustive review of offence statistics related to young people aged 14-19 years over the period 2009-2013. The supplementary data contained in the addendum paper provides material on fines referred to Court for collection and their outcomes. The collaborative involvement of government analysts was critical to the project. The data on first proved offending (serious offences that require a Court outcome), identifies significant reductions from 2009 to 2013. These reductions flow through all the data and also include significant reductions in all traffic

offending including adults. Given no reduction in enforcement resourcing over this same period, this is a remarkable finding, which hints at successes in the New Zealand settings for offending that are worthy of further research. The report has not, at this stage, proposed any explanation of these reductions but discussions with the Reference Group and the analysts involved in the project suggested that the use of Policing Excellence (PE) could play a major role in this phenomena. PE is the largest, strategically significant and operationally relevant change programme undertaken by New Zealand Police to date. PE changed the face of policing in New Zealand, shifting the emphasis away from being predominantly reactive and offender focused, to being proactive, prevention and victim focused, resulting in a modern, mobile and accessible Police service.

The data contained in the paper shows that 54 % of first time youth traffic proved offending 2009-2013 and 53 % of total youth traffic cases at Court 2009-2013 are alcohol related. From 2009-2013 54.1 % of disqualifications for drivers aged 15-19 are for alcohol related offences. The early impact of the introduction of the youth zero alcohol limit are reflected in the data contained in this paper and could provide an opportunity for an early evaluation of the zero limits effectiveness. Further detailed research on youth drink and drug driving in New Zealand would be desirable.

The data shows that Police infringements are the largest component of youth traffic offending. The majority of infringement fines imposed are referred to Court unpaid. 68.3 % of all total infringements are referred to Collections after the payment period (56 days) had expired. Further research on the Collections data, particularly a review of the use of infringements and the payment methods involved, may be of benefit in informing on its efficacy as a response to youth traffic offending.

A Graduated Driver Licence System (GDLS) was introduced to NZ to reduce the exposure of inexperienced drivers to high risk situations. GDLS breaches account for 72% of all youth High Risk Driving Offences for 2009-2013, 26.9% of all youth traffic offences 2009-2013 and 3% of total youth and adult traffic offences 2009-2013. From 2009-2013 97.1 % of youth GDLS breach offences resulted in an infringement offence of which 72.8 % was referred to Court unpaid. Further research on the use of the infringement based response for GDLS breaches and information on international initiatives/interventions regarding this type of offending would be desirable.

The first time youth traffic offender re-offending rates are high (though absolute numbers are low), and the effectiveness of the current penalties regime for our cohort of offenders may benefit from a review. It is suggested that the current use of rehabilitative efforts and technologies, such as alcohol interlocks, as a sentencing option for our cohort of offender should be reviewed. An international literature review of initiatives/interventions used for youth traffic offenders across all traffic offence types may provide useful information for any such reviews undertaken.

Regarding the question 'Is traffic offending a leading path into the criminal justice system for young New Zealanders?' If the term path is used as a first appearance at Court then the data contained in this paper would suggest that the answer is yes, with 41% of all proved first offending being traffic offences in 2009 and 46.4% in 2013. Further research is required to identify whether there are more effective interventions than standard penalties at reducing re-offending and improving road safety outcomes.