

Community attitudes to countermeasures that target high risk road users and behaviours

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Abstract

Victoria has recently introduced a range of measures aimed at reducing road trauma, particularly amongst the young driver population. While it is anticipated that measures such as peer passenger restrictions and the mandating of 120 hours of experience for learner drivers will have positive impacts on road safety, further reductions can still be achieved. The aim of this research was to explore community views regarding a number of potential measures which target high risk road users and behaviours. Some of the measures explored included the current hoon legislation that involves vehicle impoundment as a sanction, vehicle impoundment for suspended drink drivers, the Victorian demerit point system, the use of intelligent speed adaptation (ISA) in reducing road trauma and night driving restrictions for probationary drivers in their first year of driving. Qualitative and quantitative research was undertaken. A representative sample of 628 Victorians aged 18+ years was surveyed for this research, supplemented by a boosted sample of 100 18-25 year olds. The results of this research will assist policy makers in developing policy positions and ultimately enhance the development and implementation of effective measures to reduce road trauma in Victoria.

Keywords

Community attitudes, high-risk behaviour, countermeasures

Introduction

Victoria has a strong road safety record, and has recently introduced a range of measures aimed at reducing road trauma, particularly amongst the young driver population. While it is anticipated that measures such as peer passenger restrictions and the mandating of 120 hours of experience for learner drivers will have positive impacts on road safety, further reductions can still be achieved. There are several countermeasures that could be introduced in Victoria to assist in reducing road trauma. Night driving probationary driver restrictions, hoon driving penalties, vehicle impoundment as a sanction for drink drivers, reducing the legal blood alcohol limit, amendments to the demerit point scheme, and intelligent speed adaptation were explored as part of this research.

Night driving restrictions

Graduated Licensing Systems (GLS) in many North American jurisdictions impose late night driving restrictions on newly licensed drivers. This means that they are not permitted to drive at night (usually between the hours of 10pm and 6am) unless they are supervised by a fully licensed driver. The Victorian GLS does not include night driving restrictions for newly licensed drivers. However, there is consistent evidence across numerous studies that night driving restrictions are effective in reducing the number (and rate) of night time crashes experienced by drivers subject to graduated licensing (1, 2).

Hoon related offences and penalties

Hoon driving is generally considered to include high risk behaviours, such as excessive speeding, doing burnouts and street racing and also includes driving a vehicle in a way that makes unnecessary noise or smoke. Current penalties for hoon-related offences in Victoria include 48 hours vehicle impoundment or immobilisation for first time offenders, three months impoundment or immobilisation for second time offenders, and permanent forfeiture for third time offenders. There is very limited research available regarding the effectiveness of vehicle impoundment as a sanction for hoon drivers. However, statistics from Victoria Police indicate that only 5% of hoon offenders are caught committing a second offence and only 1% are caught committing a third offence (3).

Vehicle impoundment as a sanction for drink drivers

Vehicle impoundment is used in some overseas jurisdictions as a sanction for traffic offenders who are caught drink driving while their licence is suspended or who are abusing alcohol interlock programs. This impoundment period is usually between one and six months. Evaluations of overseas drink driving

impoundment programs have shown reductions in recidivism rates for drink drivers and decreases in total fatality and injury traffic crashes with the implementation of impoundment laws (4, 5).

Reducing the legal blood alcohol limit

Drink driving continues to be a significant road safety problem. In Victoria, the legal blood alcohol content (BAC) limit for full licence holders is 0.05, and zero for Probationary licence holders and Learner Permit holders. In Sweden in 1992, the legal BAC limit was reduced from .05 to .02 for all drivers. An evaluation of the reduction in the legal BAC level showed a 10% reduction in fatal crashes (6).

Demerit Points and Speeding

Demerit points are accrued in Victoria for a variety of traffic offences, such as speeding and use of a mobile phone. In Victoria, fully licensed drivers who accrue 12 or more points in any three year period may have their licence suspended. Demerit point schemes have been widely adopted in many developed countries including Canada, France, Germany and Italy. A Victorian study found that accrual of demerit points can be used to predict a driver's future crash involvement (7).

Intelligent Speed Adaptation (ISA)

Intelligent Speed Adaptation (ISA) uses information about how fast a vehicle is travelling and the speed limit in that location to provide feedback to the driver or to prevent the vehicle from travelling over the speed limit. Speed limiting (referred to as active ISA) and warning versions of ISA are available. The safety benefits of ISA have been demonstrated in a number of research studies both in Australia and around the world (8). While these studies do have some methodological limitations, there is consistent evidence that indicate ISA technologies have an effect on driving speed. ISA, particularly active ISA, has the potential to be used as a speed management tool for recidivist speeders. As is the case with alcohol interlocks, an ISA system could be fitted to an offender's vehicle as a condition of re-licensing.

These are some of the potential measures that could be implemented in Victoria to assist in reducing road trauma. While some of the measures have significant evidence supporting their effectiveness, the effectiveness of other measures still requires more research. In addition to considering the effectiveness of any new countermeasures, it is also important to consider community attitudes towards the measure. Community attitudes to road safety are often advocated as a necessary condition for improvements in road safety (9, 10). In addition, there is some research to suggest that attitudes can influence driving behaviour, and as such attitudes and acceptance of new countermeasures need to be considered when implementing any new countermeasures (11).

The aim of this research was to explore community views regarding a number of potential measures which target high risk road users and behaviours. The research examined the level of community support for:

- The introduction of night driving restrictions for probationary drivers during their first year of driving.
- The existing hoon legislation and proposals for tougher sanctions for hoon drivers, including crushing of vehicles.
- Vehicle impoundment being used as a sanction for drink drivers who are caught driving while suspended.
- Reducing the allowable blood alcohol limit for fully-licensed drivers to 0.02.
- Current demerit point penalties for speeding.
- The introduction of double demerit points during holiday periods.
- Automatic licence suspension for high-level speeding by probationary drivers during their first year of driving.
- Using ISA as a sanction for recidivist speeding offenders.

Method

There were two phases to the research project; a small qualitative phase and a larger quantitative phase.

Qualitative Phase

The research project was primarily quantitative in nature, however two focus groups were conducted with young drivers in Melbourne prior to the quantitative survey. The purpose of this phase was to better understand responses to the proposed measures and aid questionnaire development.

Separate focus groups were conducted with male and female probationary drivers aged 18 to 24 years. Eight participants attended each group and received a financial gratuity for their participation.

Quantitative Phase

Six hundred and twenty eight Victorians aged 18 years and over were interviewed using a CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) methodology.

Six hundred of the 628 interviews were conducted using a proportional sampling methodology to ensure the sample was broadly representative of the Victorian population on the basis of age group, gender and residential location (metro/rural).

Based on population incidence, we would expect a random population survey of 600 people to yield approximately 72 respondents aged 18-25 years. This age category was boosted to provide a total of 100 interviews to allow us to report the views of this age group separately. The sample design is shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Sample design

	Number	%
Male	301	48
Female	327	52
18-25 years	100	16
26-39 years	159	25
40-49 years	119	19
50-59 years	102	19
60+ years	148	23
Melbourne	440	70
Regional/rural	188	30
TOTAL	628	100

Respondents were randomly selected within each age, gender and location quotas from the electronic White Pages.

Throughout the paper, the 'Victorian population' data includes the 600 surveys which are proportional to the Victorian population (including the first 72 18-25 year olds interviewed). The 18-25 year old age category, when reported separately, includes the 100 interviews achieved with this age group.

Results

The results are reported under the broad topic areas investigated: night driving restrictions, hoon driving, drink driving and speeding. Where possible, data has been compared to the results of a 2005 survey (12).

Night driving restrictions

Participants were asked about their level of support for various night driving restrictions for first year probationary drivers. Firstly, participants were asked if they would support a night driving restriction from 10pm to 5am for the first year. If their response to this question was 'no,' they were then asked if they would support a night driving restriction from 1am to 5am for the first year. If their response to this question was also 'no,' they were then asked if they would support a night driving restriction from 10pm

to 5am for the first 6 months. If they responded 'no' again, they were then asked if they would support a restriction from 1am to 5am for the first 6 months. Table 2 shows the cumulative levels of support for night driving restrictions among the Victorian sample and the 18-25 year old sample. The process of questioning assumed that if the respondent supported the first restriction listed, they would also support the latter restrictions.

Table 2: Level of cumulative support for various night driving restrictions

	Vic pop (%)	18 to 25 yrs (%)
Restriction for first year		
10pm to 5am	47	28
1am to 5am	68	53
Restriction for first six months		
10pm to 5am	72	60
1am to 5am	74	62

As shown in Table 2, there is a strong preference for the restriction to commence at 1am (68% support) rather than 10pm (47% support). The highest level of support for a night driving restriction was for the first six months between 1am and 5am, with 74% of the Victorian population and 62% of the 18-25 year olds supporting this measure. The level of support for night driving restrictions remains relatively unchanged from the 2005 survey.

Respondents who did not support any of the night restrictions for probationary drivers were informed that probationary drivers are six times more likely to have a fatal crash when driving at night, compared to driving during the day, and were asked if this information changed their view about a night restriction for probationary drivers during the first six months. This crash information increased support for a night driving restriction by only 3% in both samples. Respondents who did not support any of the night restrictions for probationary drivers were then informed that most states in the USA have night driving restrictions for young drivers and that these restrictions have been shown to reduce crashes among young drivers. They were asked if this information changed their view about a night restriction for probationary drivers during the first six months. The USA curfew information increased support for a night driving restriction by only 4% in both samples

Following the presentation of the USA curfew information, support for a night restriction for probationary drivers during the first six months increased to:

- Victorian population sample - 78% (males 69%: females 86%).
- 18-25 year old sample - 66% (males 61%: females 72%, 23-25 yrs 85%).

Respondents who did not support any night restriction for probationary drivers were asked the reasons why they did not support this measure. The main reasons for not supporting a night restriction are the view that probationary drivers have a licence and should therefore be allowed to drive at all times, that a curfew would have too much impact on young drivers' personal freedom and that it is important to obtain experience driving at night. A further significant issue, particularly for young drivers, is that a night driving restriction is in conflict with the 'designated driver' approach, where one of a group of friends does not drink and drives the others home.

Hoon driving

The current penalty for a first hoon driving offence is impoundment or immobilisation of the vehicle for 48 hours and for a second hoon driving offence the penalty is impoundment or immobilisation of the vehicle for 30 days. The current penalty for a third hoon driving offence can involve the vehicle being confiscated forever. Participants were asked if they thought the current hoon driving offence penalties

were sufficient. A substantial proportion of those surveyed believe that current penalties for first and second offences are not tough enough, while the penalty for a third offence is considered to be about right (see Table 3).

Participants who did not think that the current penalties for the first and third hoon driving offence were too tough were asked their opinion about tougher penalties. Considerable support exists for extending the penalty for the first offence from vehicle impoundment for 48 hours to vehicle impoundment for 30 days (70% of Victorian population and 63% of 18-25 year olds). Less support exists for extending the penalty for the third offence to include crushing of the vehicle involved in the offence (55% of Victorian population and 53% of 18-25 year olds).

The main reasons against crushing vehicles are that it is considered a waste of resources and that an adequate penalty would be to confiscate the car forever, sell it or use it for another purpose.

Table 3: Support for hoon offence penalties

	Vic Pop (%)	18-25 yrs (%)
First hoon offence		
Too tough	3	4
About right	38	58
Not tough enough	60	38
Second hoon offence		
Too tough	5	7
About right	44	54
Not tough enough	51	38
Third hoon offence		
Too tough	16	22
About right	69	69
Not tough enough	14	8

Drink driving

Participants were asked about their level of support for vehicle immobilisation for six months as a penalty for people who have lost their licence for drink driving, but continue to drive while they are unlicensed. Almost all respondents supported this penalty (92% of Victorian population, 93% of 18-25 year olds).

Participants were then asked if they would support the allowable blood alcohol content (BAC) for fully-licensed drivers being reduced from 0.05 to 0.02. Around one third of the Victorian population sample and the 18-25 year old sample supported this measure (37% and 31%, respectively). Those who did not support the measure were informed that reduction of the allowable BAC to 0.02 in Sweden has resulted in a 10% reduction in fatal crashes. This information increased support for the measure substantially to 55% of the Victorian population sample and 49% of the 18-25 year old sample. Women were considerably more supportive of this measure than were men, with around half of all women supporting the measure initially (females: 49%; males: 25%) and more than two thirds of women supporting the measure after the presentation of the Swedish data (females: 69%; males: 40%).

The main reasons for people not agreeing with a reduction in the allowable BAC to 0.02 are that a BAC of 0.05 is considered reasonable and people understand it, it is considered to be too difficult to judge if one's BAC is 0.02, and the reduction is considered to be too much of a restriction on people's lifestyle.

Speeding

This section reports on participants' views about the current demerit point penalties for speeding offences, and tougher penalties for speeding offences.

Figures 1-4 show the level of support for the current demerit point penalties at different levels of speeding. The data shows that about two-thirds of participants believe the penalties are about right for speeding offences at 5km/h and 10km/h over the speed limit, while the majority of participants believe the penalties for 20km/h and 30km/h over the speed limit are not tough enough.

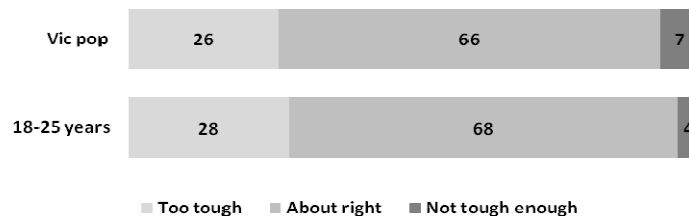


Figure 1: Support for 1 demerit point for speeding 5km/h over the speed limit

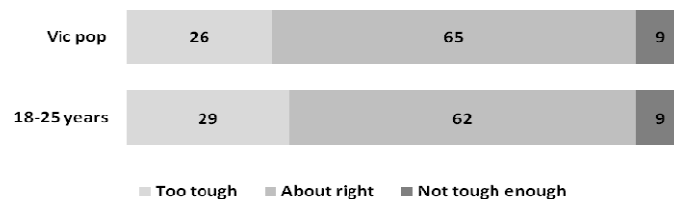


Figure 2: Support for 3 demerit points for speeding 10km/h over the speed limit

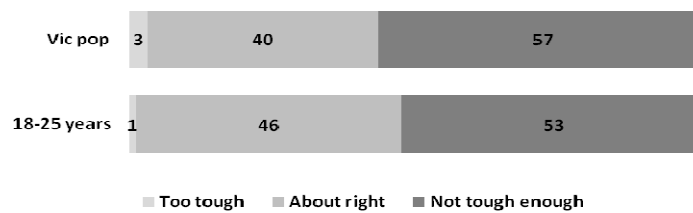


Figure 3: Support for 3 demerit points for speeding 20km/h over the speed limit

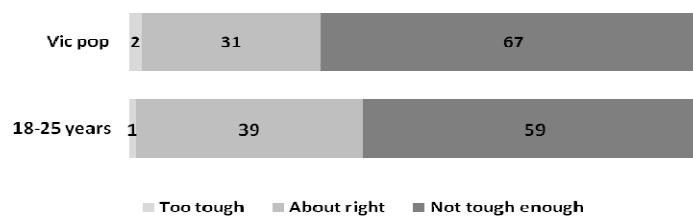


Figure 4: Support for 4 demerit points for speeding 30km/h over the speed limit

Participants were asked their views on tougher penalties for speeding offences (see Table 4). There is a very high level of support (91%) for automatic licence suspension for six months for probationary drivers who speed 30km/h or more over the speed limit. Those who did not support the penalty of licence suspension for six months were asked if they would support licence suspension for three months. As the level of support was already high, a reduced penalty of licence suspension for three months increased support only slightly to a very high 98% of the Victorian population sample and 99% of the 18-25 year old sample.

Participants were asked their views on using ISA as a condition of relicensing for high level speeders. A reasonably high level of support (81% of Victorian population and 83% of 18-25 year olds) exists for speed limiting ISA as a condition of relicensing for all people who have lost their licence for speeding 30 km/h or more over the limit. The key reason for some respondents not supporting this measure was that it is considered to be potentially dangerous, as it is believed that drivers may need to speed to avoid a problem, rather than because the punishment is considered to be too severe.

Support for double demerit points for speeding offences during holiday periods was somewhat lower than other tougher penalties for speeding, with just over half of respondents supporting this measure.

Table 4: Level of support for tougher speeding penalties

	Vic pop (%)	18 to 25 yrs (%)
Support tougher penalties		
Six month licence suspension for p-platers speeding 30+ km/h	91	91
Three month licence suspension for p-platers speeding 30+ km/h	98	99
ISA as condition of relicensing for all drivers speeding 30+ km/h	81	83
Double demerit points for all speeding offences in holiday periods	59	59

Discussion

This research examined community attitudes to a variety of potential road safety countermeasures, in particular night driving restrictions, hoon driving, drink driving and speeding. Support for the different measures varied, and in general, respondents had more favourable views about countermeasures that targeted the very high risk behaviours, than those that targeted behaviours that were perceived to have lower risk (e.g. lower levels of speeding).

Night driving restrictions were supported in some form by three quarters of the Victorian population and two thirds of 18 to 25 year olds. The results indicated that there is a strong preference for the restriction to commence at 1am rather than 10pm, suggesting that this time is perceived as less restrictive on a young person's freedom, while still recognising that a night restriction would have some road safety benefit.

When asked about penalties for hoon-related offences, a substantial proportion of participants believed that current penalties for first and second offences are not tough enough, while the penalty for a third offence is considered to be about right. Support was also high for increasing the penalty for a first hoon offence, suggesting that hoon driving behaviours are not accepted by the wider community. The high level of support for the hoon laws could perhaps be indicative of the extensive media coverage of hoon driving and hoon laws in Victoria in recent years.

Support for the current demerit point penalties for speeding varied. The data suggests that while there is considerable tolerance for 'lower-level' speeding, up to 10km/h over the limit, high level speeding is not accepted and is seen to require tougher penalties. Support for double demerit points for speeding offences during holiday periods was somewhat lower, with just over half of respondents supporting this measure. Perhaps this is because tougher measures are considered to be only appropriate for high level speeding.

Road safety strategies combine road safety engineering, education campaigns and law enforcement measures to reduce road trauma. Understanding community attitudes towards potential countermeasures can help target education campaigns and can potentially increase the level of support for new measures. The results of this research will assist policy makers in developing policy positions on these countermeasures and ultimately enhance the development and implementation of effective measures to reduce road trauma in Victoria.

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