

# **The Experience of Learning to Drive in New Zealand: A Survey of Novice Drivers and their Parents**

**Cambridge S., NZ Roadshow Trust**

## **Abstract**

The NZ Roadshow Trust surveyed young drivers and their parents on their experience when learning to drive. The sample consisted of 324 young drivers and 146 of their parents/caregivers. Information included ages at different stages of getting a licence, who provided instruction and type and frequency of driving practice. Respondents were asked about attitudes during lessons and practice and whether the experience was positive. Results show that the majority of young drivers get most lessons from parents/caregivers. Most get fewer hours of practice during the learner phase than recommended. Many parents/caregivers said they were nervous. Twenty nine percent of these young drivers reported having had an accident. Following recommendations from the survey, the Roadshow Trust is developing a pilot programme to raise awareness among novice drivers and their parents of the need for more driving experience.

## **Keywords**

Novice Drivers, Driving Instruction, Driving Experience

## **Introduction**

This paper describes a study carried out by the NZ Roadshow Trust to investigate the experiences of young drivers and their parents when learning to drive.

Young drivers in New Zealand contribute disproportionately to injuries and deaths on our roads. In 1999 the 15-24 year age group accounted for 25% of road deaths and 31% of reported injuries (Motor Accidents in New Zealand 1999) (1). Reducing the numbers of road crashes in this group would make a huge difference to the crash statistics.

## **Background**

In Victoria, where strategies using enforcement and promotion have achieved huge reductions in road fatalities, young people are still over represented in road crashes (Cockfield et al 1999)(2). To address this issue TAC and VicRoads have developed several programmes for novice drivers including "HELP", and "Ls to Ps (Cockfield et al 1999) (2). The aim of these programmes is to increase the amount of supervised driving undertaken by students during the learner phase of their licence. Studies in Sweden indicate a 30% reduction in crashes where students had 120 hours or more of supervised experience before driving solo (Cockfield 2000) (3). This is considered the optimum number of hours to improve the crash rate.

Warren A. Harrison (1999) (4) found that many new drivers were getting their licences with much smaller amounts of driving experience. Parents were found to be the most frequent supervisors of driving in the learner phase. The Australian programmes used advertising, resource packs, manuals and log books to persuade parents to give more supervised driving sessions to their sons and daughters.

## **Purpose of the Study**

The NZ Roadshow Trust decided to find out what kind of experiences young drivers and their parents have in New Zealand and whether the needs here are similar to those in Australia.

## **Setting up the Study**

The Roadshow Trust briefed Gary Nicol Associates to carry out a survey of young drivers and their parents/caregivers, working through schools. Six secondary schools were chosen to include a mix of private and state schools, single sex and co-educational schools, and a rural school.

## **Methodology**

Gary Nicol drew up two questionnaires, one for students and one for parents/caregivers, in consultation with members of the Roadshow Trust. The student questionnaire asked for information about gaining a driver licence including the level of licence currently held, the driving experience prior to gaining a learner licence, and the age at which each level of licence was gained.

Questions about the learning process included how much instruction came from a professional driving instructor, who else was involved in the instruction/practice process, what kind of vehicle was used for instruction and practice, the length of driving/practice sessions, and road and traffic conditions experienced while learning. Students were also asked about their frame of mind and enjoyment of the process, and perception of the instructor/supervisor's frame of mind. Questions were included on the road crashes and infringement notices students had experienced, and whether they had undergone advanced driver training.

The parent/caregiver questionnaire asked for information on level and class of licence held, age when licence was gained, whether a professional driving instructor was involved, and incidence of infringement notices.

Parents/caregivers were asked about their involvement in the training process, the length of instruction/practice sessions, and their frame of mind during the driving sessions. Finally they were asked whether the process was enjoyable.

The student questionnaire was administered in six secondary schools to students with learner, restricted or full licences. The students completed the questionnaires under supervision from a member of Gary Nicol Associates.

Parent/caregiver questionnaires were sent home with the students. Parent/caregivers were requested to complete the forms at home and return them to school or post them direct to Gary Nicol Associates. There were 324 students in the survey. In total 146 questionnaires were returned from parents, giving a response rate of nearly 50%.

## **Results**

The main findings of the study were as follows:

~~✍~~ In the student sample 40% had learner licences, 45% had restricted licences and 15% had full licences.

- ✍ 75% of the student sample had driven on or off road prior to gaining a learner licence. 33% had driven a car on a public road before they had a learner licence.
- ✍ Just under 90% of the student sample gained a learner licence on their first attempt. 91% had obtained it by the age of 16½ years, 19% within a month of their fifteenth birthday.
- ✍ 21% of the student sample were less than 15 years old at the time of their first driving lesson. Just under 55% were aged between 15 and 16 years while 22% were over 16 years.
- ✍ 65% of the student sample had received lessons from a qualified driving instructor. This compares with 54% of the parent/caregiver sample who indicated that they had received such lessons. However 36% had had only 1-5 sessions with a driving instructor. Another 24% said they had 6-10 sessions.
- ✍ Most sessions on the road were with parent/caregivers. Only a few sessions were with extended family members or friends. “Dad” was most often said to be the instructor for most lessons. Mum’s car was the vehicle most often used. Only 15% of the student sample used a vehicle with automatic transmission for the majority of their lessons.
- ✍ Nearly half (46%) of the student sample said they had between 1 and 4 lessons/practice sessions during the average month. A further 24% had between 5 and 8 lessons/practice sessions per month. This suggests that almost half the student sample had lessons/practice sessions no more than once a week. Most students (80%) recalled lessons/practice being one hour or less, with 26% recalling sessions being 30 minutes or less. Parents tended to recall lessons as being shorter than did the students.

Figure 1 shows the length of sessions as recalled by the students.

**Figure 1 Length of Sessions as Recalled by Students**

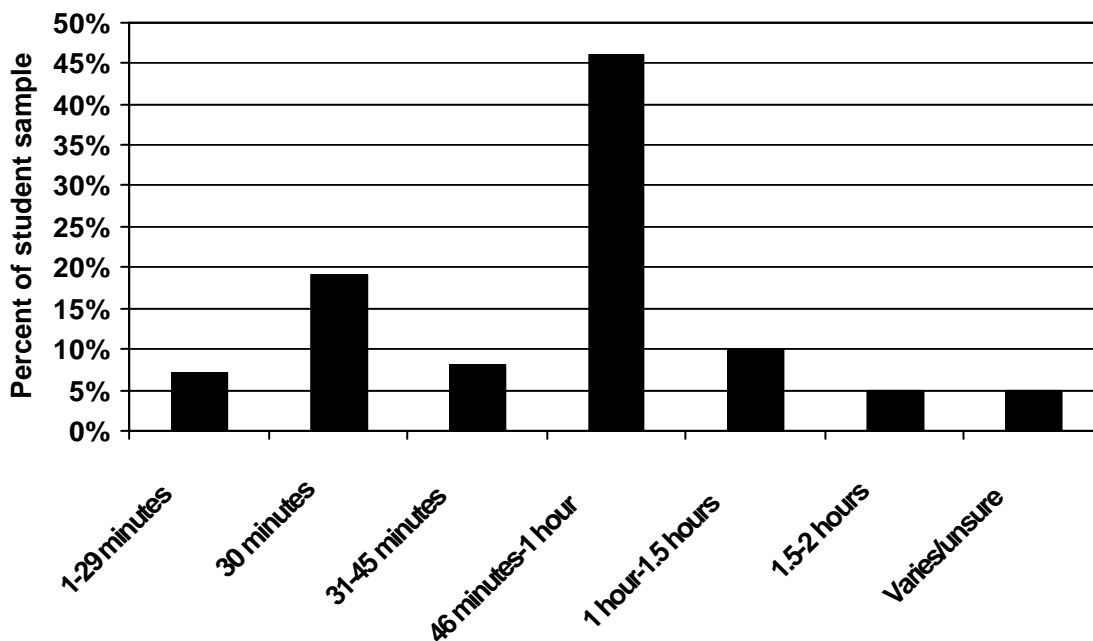
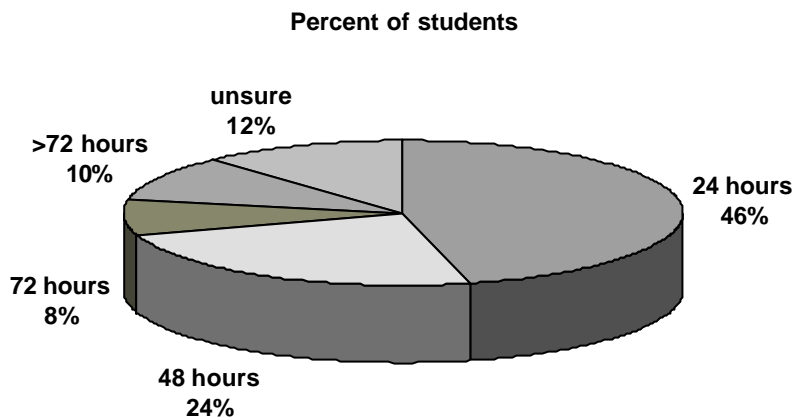


Figure 2 shows the maximum number of practice sessions over six months.

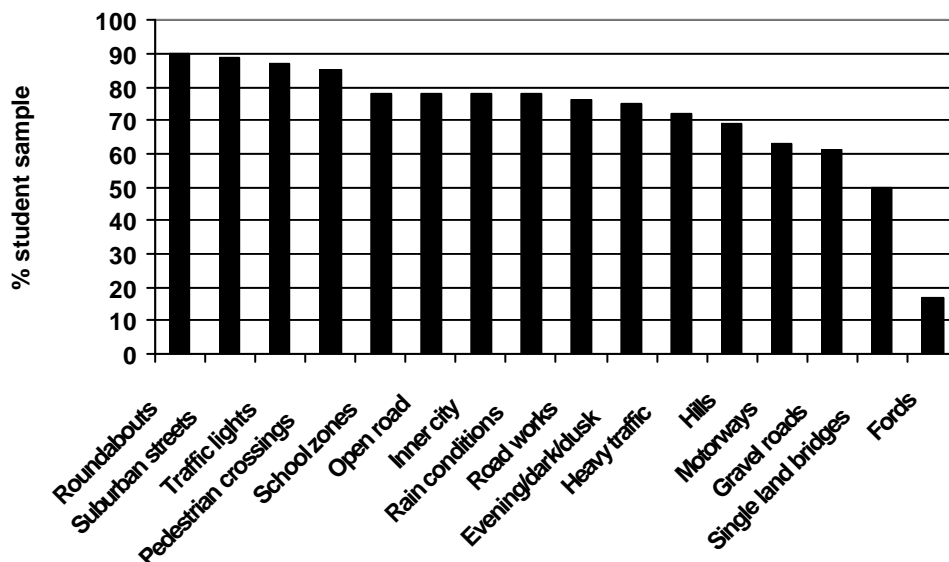
**Figure 2 Maximum Number of Practice Sessions over Six Months**



✎ 16% of the parent/caregiver sample indicated that they had not given any driving lessons/practice sessions to their son/daughter.

✎ Students were asked which of a list of different road conditions they had experienced during their lessons/practice sessions. The majority of students had experienced most of the conditions but only 50% had come across single lane bridges and only 17% had driven through a ford. More importantly, 39% of students had not driven on gravel roads, and 22% had not experienced driving in the inner city. A quarter of the students, (25%) had never driven in the dark and 22% had not driven in rain. Figure 3 shows the proportions of respondents recalling experiencing different road conditions.

**Figure 3 Experience of Different Road Conditions**



- ✍ Overall most students and parents/caregivers said the experience was a positive one. However one third (34%) of parents/caregivers admitted to being nervous, and 15% of parents/caregivers said that it was not a good experience for them. Almost 40% of the parent/caregiver respondents said they did not feel comfortable in a car driven by their son/daughter.
- ✍ Just over 80% of students who either had or had previously had a restricted licence gained it on their first attempt. A further 12% required two attempts. Of this group 39% said they obtained their restricted licence when they were 15 and most of the rest obtained it while they were 16 years old.
- ✍ Approximately 80% of students currently holding a full driver licence obtained it on their first attempt and just under 60% of this group obtained it while they were aged 16 years. A further 23% gained this licence between 17.0 and 17.5 years.
- ✍ 29% of the student sample had had an accident of some kind. It was found that 26% of the student sample who had most lessons from a qualified driving instructor had had an accident and 32% of the student sample who drove before gaining a learner licence had had an accident. There is therefore no significant difference between either of these groups and the main sample.
- ✍ Only 23% of the student sample currently having a restricted or full licence had attended a defensive or advanced driving course
- ✍ 37% of the student sample said they owned a motor vehicle

## **Conclusions**

The results indicate that the number of hours of driving experience in the learner phase is much lower than the 120 hours recommended by VicRoads based on the Swedish study mentioned in the background to this paper. Nearly half the students said they had only 1-4 driving sessions a month. Sessions were typically one hour or less. In the course of a six month learner phase they would therefore have had less than 24 hours of practice and instruction before gaining their restricted licence which allows them to drive unsupervised. About half of the remaining students had fewer than 48 hours of supervised driving experience. In his logbook based study in Australia, Harrison (1999) (4) found that students averaged 20.8 hours of driving experience over the learner period. Lack of experience seems to be similar issue in New Zealand.

Despite their lack of driving experience most students passed their licence tests at the first attempt, indicating that the licence test may be too easy.

When students were asked about the crashes in which they had been involved, 29% of them had been in some kind of crash. Most of these students were under 19 years of age, yet nearly one third of them had been involved in crashes.

Most practice/instruction sessions other than those given by professional instructors, were given by parents/caregivers. However 16% of parents/caregivers gave no supervised driving to their children, relying entirely on the driving instructor or on a few sessions with friends or siblings.

The study indicates that if novice drivers are to get more supervised driving practice in their learner stage there is a need to convince parents and students that supervised practice under a wide variety of road conditions will increase driving safety.

### **Further Action**

The NZ Roadshow Trust is currently developing a resource to provide information and encouragement to young drivers and their parents/caregivers. The resource aims to promote more supervised driving experience in the learner stage in a variety of road conditions. It is being trialled in Canterbury with resources distributed to a sample of new drivers.

### **References**

- (1) *Land Transport Safety Authority*, Motor Accidents in New Zealand 1999, ISSN 05505089 (2000)
- (2) *Cockfield, Samantha, Healy, David*, Help – An Integrated Communications Approach Targeting Young Driver Safety, Proceedings Road Safety Research, Policing and Education Conference, Canberra (1999)
- (3) *Cockfield, Samantha*, Development of a programme to increase learner driver driving practice, Unpublished paper presented at Road Safety Research, Policing and Education Conference, Brisbane (2000)
- (4) *Harrison, Warren A.*, A Logbook Based Study of the Experience of Learner Drivers, Proceedings Road Safety Research, Policing and Education Conference, Canberra (1999)