

Evaluation of the NSW older driver licensing reforms

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Abstract

This evaluation assessed the impact of a set of licensing changes for older drivers that were implemented in NSW in 2008. These changes were designed to balance the safety of road users and the general community with the continuing independence and mobility of older drivers. The evaluation showed that, overall the changes did not negatively impact safety and were generally supported by older drivers and their family members and carers. Opportunities to enhance the current system were also identified.

Background

In November 2011, the Minister for Roads and Ports approved an Older Driver Taskforce to review the current NSW licensing arrangements for older drivers. The Taskforce made specific recommendations relating to the evaluation of changes to the older driver licensing system introduced in 2008.

2008 Older Driver Licensing Changes

In 2008, the following changes were made to the licensing system in NSW for drivers aged 75 years and over, to balance the safety of all road users with the continuing mobility of older drivers:

- The commencement age for annual medical assessment for driving was reduced from age 80 to age 75 years.
- A modified licence option with distance-based restrictions was introduced for drivers from age 85 years, as an alternative to undertaking an on-road driving assessment.
- The frequency of the on-road driving assessment for drivers 85 years and over was reduced from annually to biennially.
- The design of the on-road driving assessment for drivers aged 85 years and over was changed, from a 'full' driving test to an assessment of safe driving ability.
- The option was introduced to undertake the on-road driving assessment with an accredited driving instructor.

Methods and Approach

Evaluation of the 2008 changes included:

- Estimation of crash rates per licensed driver for all drivers aged 65 years and older between 2005 and 2014, by age group.
- Comparison of licensing status before and after the changes for a cohort of older drivers between 2005 and 2014.
- Focus groups with current older drivers or those who had recently given up driving, and separately with family members or carers (n=49).
- Interviews with key stakeholders including clinicians, policy-makers, and driver trainers and assessors (n=25).

- Two state-wide telephone surveys: one with older and recently retired drivers (n=608), the other with 602 family members or carers of older drivers (n=602).

Findings and Implications

The evaluation found:

- While no change in crash rate for older drivers could be linked to the reforms, there was a gradual decline in crash rate per licensed older driver between 2005 and 2014.
- The crash rate for drivers 85 years or over with a modified licence was 18% lower than the rate for drivers in this age group with a full licence (adjusted rate ratio 0.82, 95% CI=0.73-0.91). While this may be due to reduced exposure among modified licence holders, total driving was not measured for the evaluation. After the 2008 changes, uptake of modified licences increased to 11% of drivers in this age group (compared to 2% pre-reforms).
- Driving was seen by older people as important to maintaining quality of life because it helps maintain mobility, independence and social connectedness. Opportunities to enhance the current system were identified, including improved information about alternative transport options for older people.
- The changes were generally well supported by older drivers and their family members and carers. For example, 90% of older drivers and 88% of family members/carers surveyed agreed the on-road driving test from 85 years was fair.