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The Young Driver: A Highway Warrior?

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A thesis submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology

University of Auckland
February, 1996
Young drivers have high rates of injury in New Zealand and throughout the Western world. It is commonly perceived that a major reason for this is their tendency to engage in unsafe driving behaviours, something that has frequently been labelled "risk taking". A study of the literature suggested that the term "risk taking" has been used in a variety of different ways and may have obscured our understanding of young people's motives. Theories and research reviewed on the causes of unsafe driving behaviour amongst adolescents revealed a variety of potential contributors, ranging from the individual to the social. There is little evidence to implicate young women as unsafe drivers, who are most at risk as passengers.

A survey of sixth form students ($n = 626$) found high levels of unlicensed driving, breaking the rules associated with a restricted licence, failing to wear a seat belt in the back seat, speeding and being the passenger of a drinking driver. In addition, the survey found significantly more males than females reported: driving, engaging in unsafe driving behaviours, drinking and driving, speeding on the open road, breaking the night curfew associated with being on a restricted licence and dangerous thought patterns. Females were more likely to have been the passenger of a drinking driver after the last party they attended.

Interviews with a sub-sample of those surveyed ($n = 16$) revealed a number of scenarios that led to unsafe driving. These included: peer group dynamics, the adolescent sub-culture, emotional stress, an apparent lack of awareness of risk, and practical considerations. The interviews also indicated a lack of policing of the rules associated with the Graduated Driver Licensing System (G.D.L.S.).

Interventions aimed at changing the behaviour of young drivers are examined and driver education is looked at in some detail. Problems with methodology made it difficult to reach clear conclusions about the efficacy of past programmes. Health education literature was analysed to ascertain what may be the ingredients of effective programmes for driving safety.
An intervention study was carried out that compared a group of sixth form students who received a programme for driving safety \( n = 176 \) with a control group \( n = 146 \). Measures of attitudes, knowledge and self-reported behaviours yielded no significant differences between the two groups in either the post-test or the follow-up. A variety of possible reasons for this outcome are put forward, including the programme’s emphasis on thinking processes and its low fear approach.

The recommendations that are made for decreasing the teenage road injury rate include: better policing of the G.D.L.S., education programmes and media campaigns that focus on the young male’s sense of personal immunity from risk, and increased availability of safe transport on occasions when young people are drinking. It is stressed that comprehensive safety plans that target all age groups are likely to have the greatest impact.
Highway Warriors
by Shona Laing

I can't look
At the road rising on highway one
Where the tears of the tangi go on and on
A pagan power
United now
Christmas has gone

But you can see
Along the hard shoulder where the shrines should be
Where a soul departed the flower of a memory
An empty stretch
Where bone and flesh
Met with machine

And in the war of the road
Another beautiful young man dies
Innocent strangers
Another woman another child
Drive into danger
Out of an ordinary day
While the highway warriors
Wait in the passing lane
I would like to thank Jeff Field for his continual help and support with this thesis. His advice and careful reading of my material were invaluable. Thank you to Barry Kirkwood for his comments and for initiating the project. John Gribben is also thanked for his availability and patience in helping with the data analysis.

The Accident Rehabilitation and Compensation Insurance Corporation funded this research and are gratefully acknowledged. Particular thanks to April Bennett for her encouraging letters and for providing me with valuable references.

My fellow PhD students in the Psychology Department are thanked for their support. I would especially like to acknowledge Kate Paulin, Heather McDowell, Tim McCreanor, Sylvia Blood and Ian Lambie for their encouragement and advice. Our lunches were a major highlight for me during the last 3 years.

Rachael McLaren from the Land Transport Safety Authority has been very helpful in reading my thesis and providing me with information.

With two small children, I could not have undertaken this project without a great deal of practical support. Keith, my husband is thanked for his flexibility and understanding. The staff of Kelston Girls’ High School Daycare Centre are also acknowledged with gratitude. In particular I would like to thank Colleen O’Brien, not only for her care of Rita and Max, but also for her continual interest in the progress of my thesis.

Numerous other people, Keith’s and my families, my friends and neighbours, have taken an interest in this work and have in one way or another kept me going.

Lastly, I would like to thank the staff and students at the schools that participated in the empirical studies.
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