

Adolescent Risk Research Unit

Rise, and shine.

Revisiting the concept of the 'problem young driver' within the context of the 'young driver problem': Who are they?

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Why do this research?

All young drivers are at increased crash risk, and this is the 'young driver problem'. We know, however, that there is a subset of young drivers within this young driver problem who are detected for driving offences and are involved in road crashes in which they are at fault. These drivers are known as 'problem young drivers'.

What did we do?

378 young Queensland drivers aged 17 to 25 years of age completed two online surveys regarding their driving behaviours during the Learner and Provisional licence phases and personal characteristics such as sensation seeking propensity and mental health.

What did we find?

Three sub-groups of young drivers were identified. Group 1 contained 43% of the sample and were classified as low risk young drivers. These young drivers reported relatively low mental health issues, sensation seeking and reward sensitivity, as well as safer driving behaviours on the road as a learner or P1 driver (P-plater).

Group 2 also contained 43% of the sample. These young drivers reported greater mental health difficulties, reward sensitivity and sensation seeking propensity, with more risky driving behaviours as a learner or P-plater compared to Group 1. Furthermore, this group more commonly reported that they had crashed their car and that they had been detected for a driving offence during the P1 phase, and all of these measures were at a considerably greater rate than Group 1.

Group 3 contained 13% of the young drivers and consisted of the most risky drivers, arguably, the 'problem young driver'. Not only did these young drivers have the greatest mental health issues, sensitivity to reward and sensation seeking propensity, these young drivers were also more likely to report they had driven on the road before they gained a learner licence (pre-licence driving). Their logbook was generally more inaccurate, they had driven unsupervised as a learner, and they engaged in a breadth of risky driving behaviours as a learner or P-plater. As a P-plater, these young drivers were also considerably more likely to report they had crashed a car, had an offence detected, and had talked their way out of a ticket when an offence had been detected.

What does it mean?

While all young drivers are at risk, and intervention should be designed to minimise crash risks for all young drivers, there clearly are three sub-groups of young drivers, with one small very high risk group of young drivers in particular meriting targeted intervention. Given that these young drivers were more likely to report that they had had an offence detected during the learner phase, and that they had engaged in pre-licence and unsupervised learner driving which seems to have been a precursor to more risky driving behaviour during the P-plate phase, targeted intervention efforts should occur during the learner licence phase and continue throughout the P-plate phase to realise improved road safety during this particularly risky driving period.