Why do this research?

Despite trying to intervene to improve young driver road safety for more than half a century, young novice drivers continue to be overrepresented in car crashes, fatalities and injuries arising from those car crashes. The definition of insanity often attributed to Albert Einstein is ‘doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome.’

Interventions typically seek to address the three E’s of Education, Enforcement and Engineering. However, research suggests that young driver road safety is about so much more than the young driver themselves, despite the fact they frequently are the target of the education, engineering and the enforcement activities.

Consistent with a fresh way of thinking about young driver road safety, we applied systems thinking to this important road safety realm to reveal new insight for effective intervention in young driver road safety.

What did we do?

In this project, we attempted to map the young driver road safety system comprising important stakeholders from government policy and budgetting, through regulation to local area government, to those who exert a much more direct influence on the young drivers (such as family), to the young driver themselves, and the vehicles and roads in and on which they are driving. Not only is the young driver important; it is vital to also look at government policy at level 1, such as the graduated licencing program, general road rules, and myriad other organisations such as magistrates courts and government licencing authorities.

The next sub-level refers to important groups such as road safety researchers and advocacy groups, motoring groups and news media. The local government area level consists of parents and local governments who are central to maintaining local government roads. The technical and operational management level refers to other stakeholders such as friends, classmates, schools, driving instructors, employers and the car industry manufacturers themselves. At the young driver level, we not only have the young driver but also young passengers and other passengers who might be classmates or workmates or parents, and other road users who may also be truck drivers, bus drivers, pedestrians and cyclists or motor cyclists.
What did we find?

While we mapped the factors and stakeholders contributing to young driver road safety in Queensland, we also mapped factors contributing to young driver crashes in the global context based upon the literature regarding factors contributing to young driver crashes. By far the majority of the literature relates to factors immediately relevant or pertaining to the young driver themselves, such as personality factors and their risky driving behaviour. Some research has identified the roles that parents and their friends play, while other research has also considered vehicle-related factors, including ownership and the age and size of the vehicle. However, by far, the majority of research focuses on the young driver themselves, despite our systems thinking revealing that young driver road safety is about so much more than the young driver themselves.

What does it mean?

For effective intervention in young driver road safety, we need to move beyond thinking the young driver road safety system is overwhelmingly centred on the young driver, and that intervention should target the young driver – and only the young driver – which is the current predominant approach. We need to move beyond this approach and engage stakeholders who play differing roles at multiple levels. We also need the capacity for young drivers to actually be involved in their own road safety through a fourth ‘E’ – ‘E’ for Engagement. Without actually engaging young drivers in their road safety, we are unlikely to make considerable headway in improving young driver road safety around the world.