



**Submission for the Inquiry into Lowering the  
Probationary Driving Age to 17 Years**

**April 2016**

## **Background**

RACV has over 2.1 million members, which means that on average three out of four Victorian households contains an RACV member. This provides RACV with a broad cross section of community views through our member market research.

The age at which a person in Victoria can sit for their probationary licence is 18 years. It has previously been raised, often by young people, that there should be a reduction of first licensure to assist with employment, by suggesting that Victoria come into line with most of the other Australian states and territories and lower its provisional licensing age to 17 years.

However, the evidence suggests that these concerns are on an individual level, and that the extent of the problem is not large. Various road safety studies show that lowering the licensing age will likely increase road trauma.

The evidence available supports the Victorian licensing age remaining at 18 years. However, while support for lowering the licensing age appears to represent a minority, action is still needed to provide improvements to existing transport systems. Detailed evidence is documented in the current submission.

### **Market research results**

RACV recently conducted a poll of our members on the issue of lowering the licensing age through our e-newsletter, which is sent to 425,000 subscribers. There were 6,817 responses, with 64% not supporting a reduction in the licensing age, 32% supporting a lower licensing age of 17 years and 4% unsure.

The most common reason why people did not support lowering the licensing age was that 17 year olds are too young/immature to be driving, and the most common reason why people supported lowering the licensing age was for the licensing age to be the same as the rest of Australia.

In addition to this poll, market research was commissioned and conducted by an independent market researcher on a representative sample of 307 Victorians. Of this sample, 65% did not support a reduction in the licensing age, 21% supported a licensing age of 17 years and 14% were unsure. There were no significant difference based on where the person lived (metro versus regional/rural)

## **The impacts of lowering the probationary driving age in Victoria to 17**

### **Licence structures in other Australian states**

As shown in Table 1, the age at which a person in Victoria can sit for their probationary licence is 18 years. All other states in Australia have a licensing age of 17 years, with the exception of Northern Territory where the licensing age is 16 years and 6 months. In addition to having differing licensing ages, all states have different testing procedures, minimum learner periods, restrictions, licence conditions and requirements for new drivers.

**Table 1 – minimum age to obtain probationary drivers licence in Australian states and territories**

<b>State</b>	<b>Probationary (minimum age)</b>
VIC	18 years old
NSW	17 years old
QLD	17 years old
ACT	17 years old
TAS	17 years old
SA	17 years old
WA	17 years old
NT	16½ years old

Reducing the Victorian probationary driving age to 17 would bring Victoria into line with most other Australian states and territories (NT excluded), which may be viewed as a step forward for national uniformity of the licencing process. While national uniformity of licensing may appear to be a worthwhile goal, it is important to note that achieving uniformity is a considerably larger issue than just addressing the different licensing ages. It would involve implementing uniform testing procedures, licence conditions and also de-licensing processes. Achieving uniformity is a large task and RACV understands that it is not being actively pursued at present by the other states as the road safety benefits are unlikely to warrant the investment required.

As part of the Austroads Road Safety Taskforce, Transport of NSW commissioned Whiting Moyne Pty Ltd to develop an evidence informed Australian Graduated Licensing Scheme (GLS) policy framework (Transport for NSW, 2014). This framework was developed so each Australian jurisdiction could apply various features of the framework and aim to improve their GLS models over time, and hence also improve consistency across the states. This work highlighted a three staged GLS approach where a mandatory minimum age of 18 years for a provisional licence comprised the exemplar GLS (models were rated standard, enhanced, or exemplar). Victoria is considered a world leader in road safety, partly due to its strict licensing age, which is consistent with the exemplar model. To lower the licence age would, on this evidence, be detrimental for Victoria's road safety policy and status as a world leader in road safety. In a road safety sense, the evidence indicates that it would be more beneficial to raise the age in the other jurisdictions.

**Recommendation:**

- **The licensing age in Victoria should not be lowered to be in line with other states, as a lower licensing age will likely increase road trauma.**

**The links between the existing 18 year old probationary driving age and high youth unemployment in regional areas**

Unemployment figures for March 2016 were compiled by the Brotherhood of St Laurence, and identify the five worst performing areas of youth unemployment in Victoria as West Melbourne (17.3%), Geelong (16.9%), Hume (16.0%), North East Melbourne (15.7%), and Ballarat (15.5%). These figures show that some areas of Melbourne have similar, and in some cases worse, youth unemployment rates than regional areas.

It is also interesting to note that the youth unemployment rate in New South Wales, which has a probationary licencing age of 17, shows that the unemployment rate in some regional areas are close to or above 20 per cent (Brotherhood of St Laurence, 2016), while the NSW's overall youth unemployment rate sits at 12.2 per cent. This suggests that youth unemployment is an issue in states with a lower probationary driving age.

Regardless of these figures, it is unclear how much of the unemployment rates are influenced by a

probationary licencing age of 18 years rather than 17 years, as youth unemployment is defined as all unemployed persons aged 15 to 24 years (Parliament of Australia, 2016).

Previous research has acknowledged that some young people, especially those living in rural areas, can experience difficulties in obtaining work and education due to a lack of transport services where they live (Currie, Gammie, Waingold, Paterson, & Vandarsar, 2005). The disadvantage experienced by some young people who do not have transport options where they live and who wish to pursue employment rather than complete their secondary education is significant on an individual level. However, evidence suggests that the extent of this problem in terms of the numbers of young people impacted is not large.

Over 70% of young people living in rural Victoria complete Year 12 or equivalent (VAGO, 2012), and it was the Council of the Australian Government's (COAG) target to lift the national Year 12 or equivalent or Certificate II attainment rate to 90% in 2015 (COAG, 2012). As of November 2015, there was only a slight improvement of the national completion rate (85% up from 82.8% in 2006). At present no geographical breakdown had been released so the current status of these rates in rural Victoria is unclear.

A previous RACV survey of young people found that while a lack of transport did affect the number of social trips many young people could make, only in a few cases did it impact on their ability to get employment (Alexander, 2008).

More recent literature is emerging that indicates changes in trends for travel mode choice among young adults, which is consistent across many western countries. In particular, the preference for young people to use a car is declining (van Dender & Clever, 2013).

Further research into these issues has also identified a decline in the proportions of young adults obtaining their drivers licence (Raimond & Milthorpe, 2010; Sivak & Schoettle, 2012; Delbosc & Currie, 2014; Centre for Automotive Research, 2015). Research conducted by RACV (2015) found that there has been a decrease in licence rates for 18 year old Victorians, from 52.50% in 2001 to 39.93% in 2014. Similar declines were also seen in other age groups up to 30 years. By contrast, licence holder proportions for all ages above 30 either remained steady or increased during this time. This suggests that many young people are voluntarily delaying licensure. It is important to note that this data is Victorian wide and no geographical breakdown is available, hence it is unclear whether these trends are specific to certain regions.

Many young adults without a driver's licence do not necessarily view their situation as a disadvantage, but rather a reflection of their active travel modes and various public transport choices that better suit their needs.

Lowering the licence age to possibly assist a very small number of young people gain employment would likely result in considerable increases in road trauma and is not justifiable. A more effective solution would be to encourage both state and local governments, as well as employers, to provide better transport options to enable young people, especially those living in rural and outer metropolitan areas to take up employment opportunities. Investing in public transport and initiatives such as car-pooling and car sharing stands to benefit a much broader audience by reducing reliance on the motor car and the associated negative impacts such as congestion.

#### **Recommendation:**

- **State and local governments, as well as employers, should provide better transport options to enable young people to take up employment.**

## Separating the legal driving age and legal drinking age

The age a person can sit for a driver's licence and the age at which they can legally buy alcohol does not appear to have an impact on road safety whether they are separate or the same. This is due to two reasons:

- Most young people already drink alcohol before the legal driving age
- Probationary drivers must adhere to a zero alcohol limit and compliance with this restriction is relatively high.

A survey of the drinking habits of high school students in Australia was undertaken in 2011 and involved a sample of 25,000 secondary school students. It showed that approximately 90% of all 16-17 year olds have drunk alcohol in their lifetime, approximately 75-80% had drunk alcohol over the past year and approximately 30-35% in the past 7 days of completing the survey (White & Bariola, 2012).

Road trauma statistics show that most Probationary drivers do not drink and drive and comply with the zero BAC requirements. The largest road safety problem is when they graduate to a full licence and have to comply with a 0.05 BAC requirement (Senserrick, Hoareau & Diamantopoulou, 2002).

Some public health experts have argued that a far more valid solution to the broader problems associated with young people and alcohol misuse is to increase the legal drinking age (Toumborou, 2007).

## International licensing models

Various licensing models have been implemented in Australia and in overseas jurisdictions. The best performing jurisdictions have some form of graduated licensing. Some of these models have been evaluated to determine the positive and negative effects of the licensing system.

In particular, Senserrick & Whelan (2003) carried out a literature study of the individual components of a GLS. This work assessed the specific components of various licensing systems in North America and Europe. The positive and negative effects of specific components were highlighted. In particular, the components that are considered to have positive impacts include:

- a long learning phase with accompanied driving, in any case longer than 6 months
- not being allowed to drive at night during the intermediate phase
- not being allowed to drive with peers during the intermediate phase.
- total alcohol prohibition (also for the supervisor) during the entire learner and probationary period
- raising the age at which the intermediate phase can be started
- lengthening the intermediate phase to a minimum of one year, and preferably longer
- lengthening the phase the learner is in after having been caught committing an offence
- stricter demerit points systems for both the intermediate and beginner's licence phases

Components that were considered to have negative impacts include:

- shortening the phases if the learner takes official driving lessons or follows road safety courses
- official driver training by professional driving instructors as a total replacement of accompanied driving

Senserrick & Whelan (2003) also specifically outlined that the age for commencing accompanied driving can be around 16 without having a negative road safety effect. However, the age limit for driving independently (with restrictions) should be as high as possible (e.g. 18).

A more recent research project was commissioned by Austroads (2015a) to identify effective components of licensing schemes in order to inform licensing policy for Australia. This project mainly reviewed literature that evaluated licensing models in Australia and North America. This work highlighted that the best licensing models had the following components:

- a minimum learner age of 16 years
- a minimum learner period of 12 months
- minimum provisional age greater than 16 years (with benefits increasing with age)
- night driving restrictions
- peer passenger restrictions
- a zero BAC limit

The research literature clearly supports a provisional driving age of 18 over 17 or 16, regardless of whether the jurisdiction is Australian or international.

**Recommendation:**

- **The licencing model in Victoria should be based on research evidence and best practice to reduce the risk of increasing road trauma.**

**The correlation between a reduced probationary driving age and the road toll**

*Effect on road trauma of lowering licensing age*

If Victoria were to lower the age of first licensure from 18 to 17 years, it has been estimated that it would result in an increase each year of 10 fatalities, 241 serious injuries, and 714 minor injuries. Over a 10 year period, this would equate to an additional 1,055 people injured in crashes, which includes 2,410 with serious injuries and 100 people with fatal injuries. The National Guidelines for Transport System Management has developed full cost estimates for different types of crashes (AustRoads, 2015b). Based on the projected trauma increases, the estimated increase in cost for one year to the Victorian community is approximately \$247 million per year. This information has been sourced from VicRoads road safety experts and draws on 2014 NSW licensing rates for 17 and 18 year olds and 2014 Victorian licensing and population data. It is also based on a 9% higher crash risk for young novice drivers licensed at 17 years of age as opposed to 18 years. The figure of 9% higher crash risk was drawn from Forsyth, E., Maycock, G., & Sexton, B (1995).

Increased exposure has a role to play in the projected increase of fatalities and serious injuries. VicRoads' calculations reveal that if the licensing age were reduced from 18 to 17 there would be an additional 33,000 drivers on the road.

Similar statistical modelling has also been undertaken in South Australia which estimated that if South Australia was to increase the minimum licensing age from 17 to 18 years, then the State would see a 20% reduction in casualty crashes among 16 to 24 year old drivers, and a 5-6% reduction in their total annual road toll (Department for Transport, Energy, and Infrastructure, 2011).

While these figures are estimates, a number of evaluations have been completed in countries which have previously lowered their licensing age. For example, Canada lowered its licensing age in the 1980's, from 18 to 16 years. Evaluations showed that this resulted in a 24% increase in fatalities among new drivers (Guadry, 1987, cited in Gregersen & Bjurulf, 1996).

There has been considerable international and Australian research that has investigated the influence of licensing age on road trauma. The research strongly demonstrates that a higher provisional licensing age is associated with reduced crashes and fatalities (Drummond, 1986; Forsyth, Maycock & Sexton, 1995; Mayhew, Fields & Simpson, 2000; McCartt et al, 2009; Trempe, 2009; Williams, 2009; Williams 2010; Williams et al, 2010; Johnson & Jones, 2011;

Masten et al, 2011). The research strongly indicates that that a licensing age of 17 will result in greater road safety benefits than licensure at 16 years, just as a licensing age at 18 will have significant road safety benefits over licensure at 17 years (Austroads, 2015a).

In a detailed review of young driver licensing, Senserrick and Whelan (2003) concluded that the increased crash risks associated with a lower licensing age are related to a number of factors, including:

- immaturity (less well developed perceptual systems and behaviour);
- an increase in the total number of novice drivers on the road; and
- a reduction of the amount of time available to gain the required 120 hours experience in the learner phase.

#### *Graduated licensing and lowering licensing age*

Victoria, like many other jurisdictions, has introduced a GLS for novice drivers. The Victorian system is one of the most comprehensive in the world, with requirements for young people to have a learner permit for a minimum of 12 months, to acquire 120 hours supervised driving experience prior to licensing and hold their probationary licence for four years. The interim evaluation of the GLS has shown very positive outcomes, with a 23% reduction in first year probationary driver crashes since the program was introduced (Healy et al, 2012).

Elements of graduated licensing systems such as peer passenger and night-time driving restrictions are sometimes proposed as a way of offsetting the increase in trauma caused by lowering the licensing age. However, Drummond (1986, as cited in Drummond, 1994) found that even very strict graduated licensing restrictions are not sufficient to prevent an increase in crashes if the licensing age is lowered.

#### *Lowering licensing age and impact on crashes at older ages*

It is sometimes argued that lowering the licensing age would result in crashes that would occur among first year drivers just occurring a year earlier. It is further argued that 18-20 year olds will have more experience if they have been driving solo since 17 years and will be safer as a result. However, research has found that the disbenefit of lowering the licensing age is not overcome by a subsequently reduced crash risk among older age groups due to the accumulation of more experience (Drummond, 1989).

In research completed by Ron Christie for RACV in 2001 (and subsequently updated in 2007, 2011, and 2016), it was concluded that both driver age and experience – or inexperience - contribute to crash risk and involvement. This is a common finding of research conducted in Australia, USA, Canada, UK and Sweden (Levy, 1990; Drummond & Yeo, 1992; Maycock et al, 1991; Mayhew & Simpson, 1995; Gregersen & Bjurulf, 1996).

Research has attempted to quantify the relative effects of age from those of experience. A study of British drivers initially licenced to drive at different ages (i.e. 17, 20, 25, 36 and 50 years respectively) who travelled about 12,000 kilometres per year, found that crash risk during the first few years of solo driving decreased by about 31% due to age and about 59% due to experience (Maycock et al, 1991). Other studies have shown that although all new drivers, regardless of age, have a higher initial crash risk, the youngest drivers (e.g. those aged 15-17 years) have the highest risk (Levy, 1990; Cooper, Penili & Chen, 1995).

Thus, jurisdictions which allow licensing below the age of 18 in Australia and overseas typically have a proportionally greater young driver crash risk problem due to age effects and increased exposure given that many 15, 16 and 17 year old drivers are on the road as solo drivers.

This issue can be highlighted when considering the road toll stats for 2014. During that year, there were a total of 233 people killed on Australian roads in the 17-25 year age bracket. Forty nine of these were in Victoria, while 46 in Queensland, 67 in NSW, 41 in WA, 18 in SA, six in NT, and

three each in TAS and ACT. These figures show that on a population basis, Victoria's road toll among young adults is lower than many other states (Carey, 2016).

## **Transport infrastructure and services in regional Victoria**

In a number of areas across the State, population growth has outpaced the provision of basic infrastructure and services including public transport that is reliable, frequent and efficient. A lack of adequate public transport services, particularly in rural and regional Victoria and outer metropolitan Melbourne, can leave residents with no option but to drive. For those who don't drive, whether it is by choice or circumstance, the lack of transport options can severely restrict their ability to take part in work or school and participate in their communities more broadly.

RACV's Regional Growing Pains (2014) report identifies a package of transport upgrades needed in our ten largest regional centres over the next decade to support population growth. In mapping the upgrades needed, it is important to note that not everybody can or will want to live in a regional centre, therefore provision of adequate bus, walking and cycling connections between satellite towns and rural areas to regional hubs is vital.

The completion of the Regional Rail Link has improved rail capacity for some V/Line services, however RACV's 2015 On Track survey highlighted that further rail service and infrastructure improvements are needed across the State. The survey highlighted that regional commuters want more seats on trains, better access to stations and more frequent services. The frequency of services and the span of hours over which they operate can restrict the ability of some regional residents to access employment and educational opportunities, locally and in Melbourne.

While many major regional centres are connected to Melbourne by train or coach, cross town connections are equally important to support jobs and growth within regional Victoria. Radial bus services are particularly important for young people in outer suburbs to access jobs in neighbouring suburbs. Indeed, a lack of accessible opportunities is a contributing factor to people relocating to larger towns and cities from rural communities.

For those who need to use more than one mode of transport, the efficiency of their trips can be severely limited by poorly coordinated timetables and services that simply don't take them where they want or need to get to. Investment is also needed to upgrade ageing infrastructure to improve reliability, efficiency, safety and comfort for passengers.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Victoria's regional public transport network should be upgraded as outlined in RACV's Regional Growing Pains (2014) to offer people of non-driving age better access to employment, study and training.**
- **Increase the frequency of public transport services in rural/regional areas and the span of hours over which they operate to better meet community needs.**
- **Improve connectivity and timetable coordination between different modes of transport to improve access and efficiency e.g. connectivity between buses and trains**

### **Strategies to remove barriers for people of non-driving age to access employment, study and training**

RACV's Growing Pains (2014) report identified a number of strategies to address transport disadvantage. These strategies would also assist in the removal of barriers for people of non-driving age to access jobs and other opportunities. They include provision of better public

transport options as well as a range of services that operate at a lower cost to that of traditional public transport including telebus services, flexi cab, community transport, car pool programs, telecommuting and making school bus services available to the general public.

The importance of planning cannot be underestimated in improving access to jobs and education. Creating more local employment opportunities has the potential to reduce the disadvantage experienced by people of non-driving age as commuter trips become shorter and can be more easily met by walking, cycling or public transport.

- **Planning approaches which create more job opportunities in outer suburban and regional hubs should be encouraged, to reduce employment barriers for young people of non-driving age.**

## Summary of recommendations

- The licensing age in Victoria should not be lowered to be in line with other states, as a lower licensing age will likely increase road trauma.
- State and local governments, as well as employers, should provide better transport options to enable young people to take up employment.
- The licencing model in Victoria should be based on research evidence and best practice to reduce the risk of increasing road trauma.
- Victoria's regional public transport network should be upgraded as outlined in RACV's Regional Growing Pains (2014) to offer people of non-driving age better access to employment, study and training.
- Increase the frequency of public transport services in rural/regional areas and the span of hours over which they operate to better meet community needs.
- Improve connectivity and timetable coordination between different modes of transport to improve access and efficiency e.g. connectivity between buses and trains.
- Planning approaches which create more local job opportunities in outer suburban and regional hubs should be encouraged, to reduce employment barriers for young people without a licence.

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