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# Driving change: A case for change in driver licensing

For many New Zealanders, a licence to drive is a rite of passage and a significant milestone. Gaining our first licence not only gives us the right to drive, but offers a sense of freedom and confidence.

*But what of those who for a variety of reasons miss out on the opportunity? How do they fare in a society heavily dependent on having a driver licence—an environment where 70% of jobs require the applicant to have one?*

*A working group of Philanthropy New Zealand members have come together to see if there is a better, more strategic way to advocate or provide funding that tackles the many challenges of driver licensing.*

## Background

Local authorities began issuing licences in 1925, and when the Ministry of Transport took over in 1953, a simple 5-year renewal process was introduced. Since 1986, a graduated driver licensing system (GDLS) has been in place, consisting of three phases, each with varying conditions.

This system has improved road safety, but we no longer live in the New Zealand of 1986, and today there are far more acute reasons why people either have no licence or do not progress through the system.



*Alison Black from Youth Inspire with one of their driving students*

The *Case for Change* report was produced in 2016 by the Auckland Co-Design Lab, supported by a multi-agency team including the Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) and the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA).

The report shows around **70,000–90,000 young people currently face major barriers while progressing towards their full licence**, a situation that requires a rethink if we are to tackle these challenges and develop a new generation of safe, competent drivers.

While the current system works for most people, it doesn't work for all. Sadly, the people who fall through the cracks are often those who are most at risk—not having a licence further perpetuates this, with a future of limited employment opportunities, significant fines (or incarceration) from illegal driving, and a raft of other issues which make it difficult to change their situation.

## Licensing issues

### Family-led model

Many Kiwis learn to drive in their teens, with early lessons typically coming from family members. While this family-led model is suitable for most of us, it's not always appropriate. Not all families can provide the skills, guidance and resources required to turn a young driver into a safe, adult driver with a full licence.

### Breaching restrictions

Nearly 50% of new drivers sit on their learner or restricted licence for up to 5 years, with 84% of young people breaching the conditions of their licence.

This means that illegal driving is normalised, particularly amongst young people, and when you consider that this group are also 6–8 times more likely to crash, it makes for frightening reading.





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*Alison Black from Youth Inspire with one of their driving students*

Seemingly, there appears to be no great sense of urgency to progress through the current system. A widespread acceptance of breaching the rules is partly to blame. Providing incentives to complete a full licence may be a better option.

#### **A short-cut to jail**

Mike Williams of the Howard League requested information from the former Minister of Corrections Office which highlighted that 9% of the prison population (about 900 prisoners) and 25% of community-based offenders (about 28,000) have convictions for licence/regulatory offences. Of these, approximately 40% are Māori males aged 20–29 years.

They also highlighted that 65% of Māori who go to jail commit a driving offence as at least part of the conviction which led to a first jail sentence.

#### **Costs**

Many believe the current ‘user-pays’ model is outdated. It costs around \$340 for the tests, assuming each is passed on the first attempt. Professional lessons will add anywhere from \$50 to \$75 per lesson to the bill, with NZTA recommending around 120 hours of practice before sitting a restricted test. For many people, this is a substantial investment, and they might think it is better spent elsewhere.

#### **Accessibility**

Accessibility is another issue, as time away from school or work is required to sit the test, and there are very few testing stations outside of the main centres. Learners in rural areas often face a long journey, in a registered and warranted car, and must be accompanied by a licensed driver—who often also needs to take leave from work or study—to access the licensing services.

In an increasingly multicultural New Zealand, the lack of translations is also a hindrance, excluding many migrant communities—another sign that the flexibility of the licensing system requires an update.

#### **Employment**

Besides the anecdotal evidence, further figures support investing in a modified driver licensing system to support employment. The research showcases that 70% of all New Zealand jobs require the applicant to have a driver licence, even if it is not used directly in their work environment. More people in work means happier local communities and a boost to the wider economy.

While there is no easy fix, the broader social and economic benefits to New Zealand when uptake of licensing is high is worth an investment in change, because conversely, we all bear significant costs when people opt out.

#### **Perspectives**

Youth Inspire is an organisation that would like to see all young people under 25 engaged in meaningful education, training or employment. They’ve found that having a licence is a key employment skill identified by businesses.

“The biggest hurdle for many of our students is actually getting ID to sit their learner licence. The costs involved in obtaining these documents are often costly. They also need access to support to help learn the Road Code in order to become safe road users—for me this is really important as we all want safe drivers on our roads,” says Alison Black, Youth Inspire’s Manager.

Alison suggests that accessibility is another major hindrance that could be drastically improved.

“When our young people go to sit their learner licence test there are limited places to do this and the capacity of these places means that the wait can be a couple of hours.”

Another study produced by Synergia for NZTA aimed to develop an understanding of the social norms around driving. They focussed on interviewing high-risk young drivers to get a sense of why they were breaking GDLS restrictions. One young parent on a learner licence explained why they breach conditions, while a student listed time and expense as major hurdles.



*"I should have my partner with me at all times, but then we need someone to look after the kids. I can't do both. What would be the point of both of us loading up the car with the kids, just to go and do a one-person job when he can stay home while I go out?"*

*"I don't have that 90 dollars right now [to sit the learner test]. And then I don't have the time to go off and study. I fall into that category of, 'okay if I get the fine I'll do the time'. I don't choose to deliberately go against the law. It's like I have no other option... it's a whole range of factors that contribute to why I'm driving without a licence, why my daughter's driving without a licence, why people continue to get fines here [in Mangere]."*

Across most of the interviewees there was a consistent theme—the GDLS in its current form is getting in the way of them becoming fully licensed, safe adult drivers.

## Get on Track, Stay on Track, Back on Track, Fast Track

The *Case for Change* report offers a compelling strategy for addressing these issues, with the motto: Get on Track, Stay on Track, Back on Track, Fast Track.



### Get on track

The report identifies a need to capture young Kiwis early, helping them see the value of having a full licence and providing wraparound support for those who need it.



### Stay on track

Providing encouragement and guidance to help those who struggle with the process, and to incentivise them to keep developing their safe driving skills.



### Back on track

Extra help and alternative methods may need to be employed to help those who struggle with the process, and to avoid a costly and destructive spiral.



### Fast track

Finally, there's a strong case for helping Kiwis to get their licence faster, which can be achieved without compromising driver competence and road safety.

But how is this achievable without charging users even more than they currently pay—one of the main reported issues with the current system?

There is hope. New Zealand was one of the first countries in the world to adopt a graduated approach to licensing, and the innovations suggested in the *Case for Change* report offer a chance for us to be leaders in any new methodology.

## Grantmakers' working group

Many within the philanthropic sector certainly appreciate the need for change and innovation, and a working group has been set up to get a better understanding of the driver licensing issues, and how they can be addressed.

"We [the Vodafone NZ Foundation] noticed a trend in our funding applications, with more and more localised driver licensing programmes and community driving schools seeking our funding. Communities around the country were identifying the same need for their communities and rangatahi—a need for access to education and resources for their young people to obtain driver licences. We realised that if we fund one group here, and one group there, it wouldn't be a strategic use of our funds," explains Helen Anderson from the Vodafone NZ Foundation. "We brought together a group of funders who were seeing similar patterns in their funding applications for an initial hui in late 2018 to see if there was a better way to approach this challenge."

So far, the group includes the Todd Foundation, J R McKenzie Trust, Vodafone NZ Foundation, Wayne Francis Charitable Trust, Philanthropy New Zealand and the Mayors Taskforce for Jobs.

"It's very early days regarding what we will do as a group. As a starting point we want to get a better picture of what, and how much, philanthropy in New Zealand is providing towards the challenges of driver licensing, and how we can be more strategic to create systems change," says Helen.

The working group have begun to hold discussions with different government groups working in this space to see what is already being done in this area, and have developed a one-pager for grantmakers which is based on the existing research, to highlight the key issues.

## Get involved

The working group welcome other funders to join this group to contribute ideas for the next steps, or to share data.

If you want to get involved contact Helen Anderson, Grants Lead at Vodafone NZ Foundation: [helen.anderson@vodafone.com](mailto:helen.anderson@vodafone.com)

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Vodafone NZ Foundation