

National Story

Police to overhaul learner licences

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By [Jared Savage](#)

Almost 200 learner licence drivers are caught breaking the law every day, and police now want a radical overhaul of the licence system after a string of high-profile crashes and incidents.

Figures released to the *Herald on Sunday* show that 71,646 learner drivers were issued with infringement notices last year for licence breaches, such as driving by themselves and not displaying L plates. Most of these drivers are picked up only after police pull them over for traditional traffic offences, such as speeding.

The number of learner drivers being caught has steadily increased in the past five years – 51,642 learner drivers were caught in 2002.

It seems likely the driving licence system will be overhauled, with a policy paper recommending changes.

Last month, 15-year-old learner driver Andrew van Wyk lost control of his car and ploughed into three North Shore children and their grandmother. Nia Wallace, 3, is still in hospital with serious injuries, and police may yet charge van Wyk, a learner driver who got his car only the day before and broke his conditions. Last month, 22-year-old Jose Haenga was pulled over by Canterbury police for allegedly travelling at 180km/h. When officers spoke to him, the learner driver showed them handfuls of unpaid tickets for previous offences.

The abuse of the learner licence system has top police officers, transport officials and lobby groups worried. Under the current system, a fully licensed adult must be in the car at all times, and the vehicle must display an L plate. Drivers can try for their restricted licences after six months – or they can stay on a learner licence for an indefinite period.

"We would like to see them have a finite time to get their [full] licence or else they go back to square one," Auckland police inspector Heather Wells said. "It's giving us a real headache. We get these young ones with learner licences who don't go any further to get restricted or full licences – they just leave it."

Wells and Inspector Dave Walker headed a drink-driving sting on Tamaki Drive in Auckland last week which netted 91 drivers, 26 of them teenagers. One 16-year-old girl appeared in Auckland District Court on Friday charged with a breath alcohol reading of 864 micrograms – nearly six times the legal youth limit – and providing a false address to police. Wells and Walker said the problem of youngsters on learner licences blatantly ignoring the rules was huge. Incentives could be offered to encourage learner drivers to graduate to the next stage, rather than just giving them a fine, Walker said.

Superintendent Dave Cliff, national road policing manager, said the increase in learner driver offences could be put down to more officers on the road, but he agreed that changes needed to be made to the licensing system. A policy review last December suggested a time limit for learner licences, but Cliff also wants to see demerit points used as a deterrent, rather than the current



Andrew van Wyk lost control of his car and hit three children and their grandmother in this car.
Photo / Dean Purcell

\$400 fine for a licence breach. "We think the fine is too great and that police prefer to warn youngsters because they can't afford it. But if we increase the demerit points, then on the second or third strike, you could lose your licence for three months."

Automobile Association spokesman Mike Noon said international best practice showed learner drivers should have 120 supervised hours behind the wheel before they drove alone.

Bruce Johnson, Ministry of Transport safety policy group manager, said most learner drivers had only 40 hours of supervision, and changes to the licence system were being considered.

The AA wanted the restricted driving age increased to 16, a tougher test for learners, more demerit points and a "three strikes" system, so cars could be confiscated from repeat offenders, Noon said. A time limit for learner licences would also be welcomed.

"Once you've got a licence and a car, you've got all the toys. You're likely to break the law and carry passengers. So why spend more money on a test that you could fail?"

The latest ministry figures show that young drivers (15–19) are over-represented in crash statistics. In 2005, young drivers were at fault in 118 of the 142 fatal crashes they were involved with – killing 149 people.

The New Zealand Household Travel Survey showed that 15– to 19–year–olds were seven times more likely to crash than the 45– to 49–year–old age group.

The Licence System

The New Zealand driver licensing system has three stages. You must always carry the licence when driving.

Learner licence

Rookie drivers can get a learner licence at 15. Novices must pass a theory test of 25 multi-choice questions, which have certain conditions: You must not drive on your own. A supervisor who has held a full driver licence must always sit in the front passenger seat. You must display L plates on the vehicle at all times when you're driving. If you're under 20, the legal alcohol limit is 30mg/100ml of blood. This is effectively a zero limit.

After holding a learner licence for at least six months, you can sit your restricted licence test.

Restricted licence

Drivers are allowed to drive by themselves if they pass the practical driving test, under these conditions: You can drive on your own, but not from 10pm to 5am. Between these times, you must have a supervisor in the front passenger seat who has held a full licence for at least two years. If you sat the test in an automatic vehicle, you can drive only automatic vehicles (except with a supervisor). You must not carry passengers without a supervisor. The only passengers you can carry without a supervisor are: spouses, live-in partners or civil union partners, children you financially support, live-in relatives on a social security benefit or anyone you look after as their primary caregiver. If you're under 20, your legal alcohol limit remains unchanged.

Full licence

Restricted drivers can graduate to a full licence after 18 months, or six months if they are older than 25. After an approved defensive driving course, the waiting time is reduced further.

The Incidents

March 2007

An unlicensed West Auckland 16-year-old faces charges after allegedly stealing her grandmother's car when she is six times over the legal youth breath alcohol limit. Unlicensed Maria Whatuira, 14, is killed after crashing a car in Hawke's Bay with three friends aged 14, 15 and 16. Hayley Borell, 23, and cousin Santana, 16, lose control of their car and are killed after a night drinking in Northland.

February 2007

North Shore teenager Andrew van Wyk, 15, runs over three children and their grandmother while driving alone on his learner licence. He may face charges. Learner driver Jose Haenga, 22, is pulled over by Canterbury police after allegedly driving at 180km/h.

December 2006

Restricted driver Rae Rae, 16, allegedly flees from police at speeds of up to 180km/h with three teenage passengers after a 14-hour drinking session.

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NZH1Venom | 11 Mar 2007 10:11:27 | 1,969