

Young and New Driver RESOURCE CENTRE



UNLICENCED DRIVING

WHO ARE...

Who are unlicensed drivers?

Unlicensed drivers are drivers who have a licence that is invalid because it is suspended, revoked, inappropriate, expired or cancelled/denied, or drivers who have not gone through the process necessary to obtain a licence.¹ Any driver who is driving without proper qualifications is considered unlicensed. For instance, young and new drivers must pay close attention to the terms of graduated driver licencing (GDL) programs and understand that each licence stage may have different rules and regulations. An example of unlicensed driving would be driving without an experienced driver while holding a licence that specifies the young driver must be supervised at all times.

Why is a licence important to young drivers?

Vehicles are the most popular mode of travel, providing both the mobility and freedom² not offered by any alternatives. Unlike public transit, vehicles can be used any time, any place, and for any purpose. For youth, they are an important tool to maintain a demanding lifestyle. For teens who want to ensure a successful future they need to be able to attend classes, participate in extra curricular activities and hold down a part time job. Without a vehicle and a licence, it is more difficult for teens to maintain a tight schedule, especially if they live far away from their school and activities.

A licence leads to both greater freedom and independence but also to an increase in responsibility. Youth who have a licence are relied upon by family members to help with household chores and errands as well as driving siblings, parents and grandparents to their destinations. If a young driver loses their licence, they are not only losing their own freedom, independence and a way to manage their busy lifestyle, but this may also leave their family without a needed source of transportation.³

How many crashes involve unlicensed drivers?

In Ontario, 2,000 fatal and injury crashes occur each year involving unlicensed drivers. Approximately 1 in 14 fatal crashes involve an unlicensed driver;⁴ the problem is larger

- 1 Sweedler 2007
- 2 Hanna et al. 2006
- 3 Best 2006
- 4 Sweedler 2007

in the United States (U.S.), where 1 in 5 fatal crashes involve unlicensed drivers.⁵ For instance, a study of California drivers found that of all drivers at fault in crashes, 35.4% were driving without a valid driver's licence.⁶

According to a study conducted in the U.S., 57% of 15-year olds and 10% of 16-year olds were unlicensed at the time of a fatal crash⁷ and surveys show that 1 in 25 students in grades 9 to 11 have done at least some unlicensed driving.⁸ Unlicensed drivers under the age of 20 represent 12% of all fatal crashes in the U.S.⁹

What is the crash risk of an unlicensed driver?

Studies show that unlicensed drivers have an increased crash risk. They are overrepresented in fatal crashes¹⁰ and are more likely to be seriously injured in a crash. Unlicensed drivers are 11 times more likely to be involved in a serious injury crash compared to drivers with a valid licence.¹¹

In general, unlicensed drivers take more risks when driving. They are more likely to display risky driving behaviours such as speeding, drunk driving, and running red lights. Consequently, unlicensed drivers are more likely to be at fault in crashes and they are twice as likely to have been at fault in the crash compared to those holding a valid licence.¹² Young, unlicensed drivers in particular are at serious risk if involved in a crash; 90% of unlicensed young drivers sustain an injury in a crash and a significant percentage (44.1%) of them die.¹³

BEHAVIOURS

What are the driving behaviours of unlicensed drivers?

Not only are unlicensed drivers more likely to speed, drive drunk and run red lights but they are more likely to drive a motorcycle, not use a helmet, and not wear a seat belt. They are also more likely to attempt to flee the scene at crashes in order to avoid penalties for driving unlicensed. Alcohol use is much more common among unlicensed drivers in

- 5 Scopatz et al. 2003
- 6 Sweedler 2007
- 7 Hanna et al. 2006
- 8 Elliot et al. 2008
- 9 Hanna et al. 2006
- 10 Sweedler 2007
- 11 Blows et al. 2005
- 12 Blows et al. 2005
- 13 Hanna et al. 2006

fatal crashes; 74.1% of revoked drivers had been drinking compared with 20% of licenced drivers.¹⁴

Young unlicensed drivers are more likely to drive without a specific purpose and this puts them at higher risk of crashing compared to driving with a purpose (like going to school or work). They are also more likely to have lower grades, live in rural areas or the central city, and are less likely to have their father help them learn how to drive.¹⁵

Who is most likely to drive unlicensed?

Unlicensed drivers are more likely to be male (75%).¹⁶ Those who live in economically deprived areas (which are more likely to have poor road conditions and fewer resources such as post-trauma care) are more likely to experience a fatal crash without a valid driver's licence. Young drivers (who already have a high crash rate) in a deprived environment are more likely to drive without a licence. These youth are also more likely to drive an older vehicle, have limited supervised driving practice time and to be unable to afford a professional driver education course. Young drivers who are part of economically deprived families are also more likely to provide family transportation before getting their licence.¹⁷

What are the crash characteristics of young unlicensed drivers?

Crashes involving young unlicensed drivers often occur:

- > between Friday and Sunday;
- > between 6 a.m. and 6 p.m.;
- > on high-speed roads, involving a single vehicle; and,
- > with two or more occupants who are not wearing seat belts.¹⁸

LEGISLATION

What will happen if a driver is caught driving unlicensed?

It is against the law to drive without a licence. The Criminal Code of Canada states it is illegal for a person to operate a vehicle when they are not qualified. Each province deals with the issue differently. In British Columbia, for instance, a first offender will receive a ticket and is not permitted to drive the vehicle any further. A second offender will have their vehicle impounded for seven days and are prohibited to drive until they get their licence. If a driver continues to drive without a licence after these first two offences they are penalized with a \$500 fine and up to six months in jail.

In Ontario, if drivers are caught with an invalid licence, their vehicle is impounded for seven days (this includes a novice driver who is violating the GDL restrictions). The Ontario Highway Traffic Act specifies driving without a proper licence as an offence with a fine of at least \$200 and up to \$1,000.

14 Sweedler 2007

15 Elliot et al. 2008

16 Hanna et al. 2006

17 Hanna et al. 2012

18 Hanna et al. 2006

Novice drivers will have their licence suspended if they breach any of the GDL program requirements.

SOLUTIONS

What can the government and law enforcement do to reduce unlicensed driving?

Increased law enforcement and stricter penalties targeting unlicensed drivers have proven to curb this behaviour as well as reduce overall crash rates. For instance, taking away vehicle registration tags from offender licence plates so that they are easier to spot by police while driving would be an effective way to deter unlicensed driving. Some jurisdictions, such as Minnesota, go as far as confiscating licence plates and destroying them so offenders can no longer drive. Other jurisdictions, such as Fontana, California, implemented random checkpoints along the road with the goal of checking all drivers who are stopped for valid licences.¹⁹

Harsher penalties, such as vehicle impoundment or seizure, have also proven effective. Manitoba had positive results when they began impounding vehicles of anyone caught driving with a suspended licence; there was a 27% reduction in repeat offences of driving without a licence within four years and a 60% decrease in other traffic offences within 30 days following a driving without a valid licence offence.²⁰ In California, first time offenders who had their vehicles impounded were 18% less likely to have additional convictions. They were also 25% less likely to be involved in a collision.²¹ Higher levels of enforcement of unlicensed driving laws also leads to a reduction in crash rates. In Fresno, California the police department saw a 30% decrease in fatal and injury crashes while implementing a program that targeted unlicensed drivers.

There are also technologies used by police that can help in detecting unlicensed drivers. Automated Licence Plate Readers (ALPRs) "use cameras and computer software technology to scan plates of motor vehicles that are either mobile or parked. The licence plates can be checked against police and motor vehicle/drivers licence registration databases for the purposes of determining if the vehicle is stolen, unregistered or that it may be driven by a suspended or disqualified driver. An alert given by the ALPR will signal to police that something has been detected". When these devices are available, it is much easier and less time consuming for enforcement to detect unlicensed drivers.²²

What can drivers do to reduce unlicensed driving?

There are actions young drivers can take to ensure they are legal behind the wheel:

- > **Do not drive without a valid driver licence.** New drivers must ensure they meet the conditions prescribed in their level of the GDL program. For instance, if a driver is driving without a supervisor and this is a requirement

19 Holderness 2003

20 Beirness et al. 1997

21 DeYoung 1997

22 Fresno Police Department 1999

of their licence, their licence will be considered invalid.

- > **Always carry vehicle insurance that meets the minimum coverage required by provincial standards.** Each province has its own insurance standards and it is the driver's responsibility to make sure they are insured. Proof of insurance must be carried in the vehicle at all times or the driver can be penalized (e.g., fines, accumulation of demerit points for failing to show proof of insurance). Drivers should note that if they are in a crash while unlicensed, their insurance company can refuse to pay for the claim.
- > **Keep your driver's licence up to date and renewed, including the stickers on your licence plate.**

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