

WOMEN BEHIND THE WHEEL: YOUNG DRIVERS

This Monograph is composed of excerpts from FORS CR179 Women Behind the Wheel: Driver Behaviour and Road Crash Involvement by Dobson A, Brown WJ and Ball J of the Institute for Gender and Health, University of Newcastle.

The relevance of gender to road safety has long been recognised and it has been the contribution of male drivers to fatal and serious crashes which has, to date, attracted the most attention. Historically, men have tended to be overrepresented in road crash fatalities. In 1996, 1,413 men were killed on Australian roads compared with 564 women.

It is also true that male drivers are more likely to be killed than female drivers for every kilometre travelled. According to FORS Monograph 12, there were 0.74 male driver deaths and 0.47 female driver deaths per 100 million vehicle kilometres travelled.

While male drivers may be more at risk of death on the road, female drivers have a higher risk of sustaining serious injury. As noted in the FORS Monograph, there were 8.74 female driver admissions to hospital as a result of a road crash for every 100 million kilometres travelled compared to 7.24 admissions of male drivers. An increase in risk for female drivers has been noted in the United States of America.

It appears that the issue of female drivers is an emerging concern for road safety.

They have a higher level of risk of hospital admission by distance travelled and, due to increased travel, they represent a growing proportion of road casualties. Since 1985, kilometres driven by female drivers have increased by 43.2% compared with an increase in travel of 6.7% by male drivers.

The project

The project described in this report focuses on behaviour of women drivers and is based on two large cohorts of women who are participants in the Australian Longitudinal Study on Women's Health (WHA). The women are in two age groups (19-24 and 46-51 years at the time of this study) and are from all walks of life, living in all States and Territories of Australia. The overall

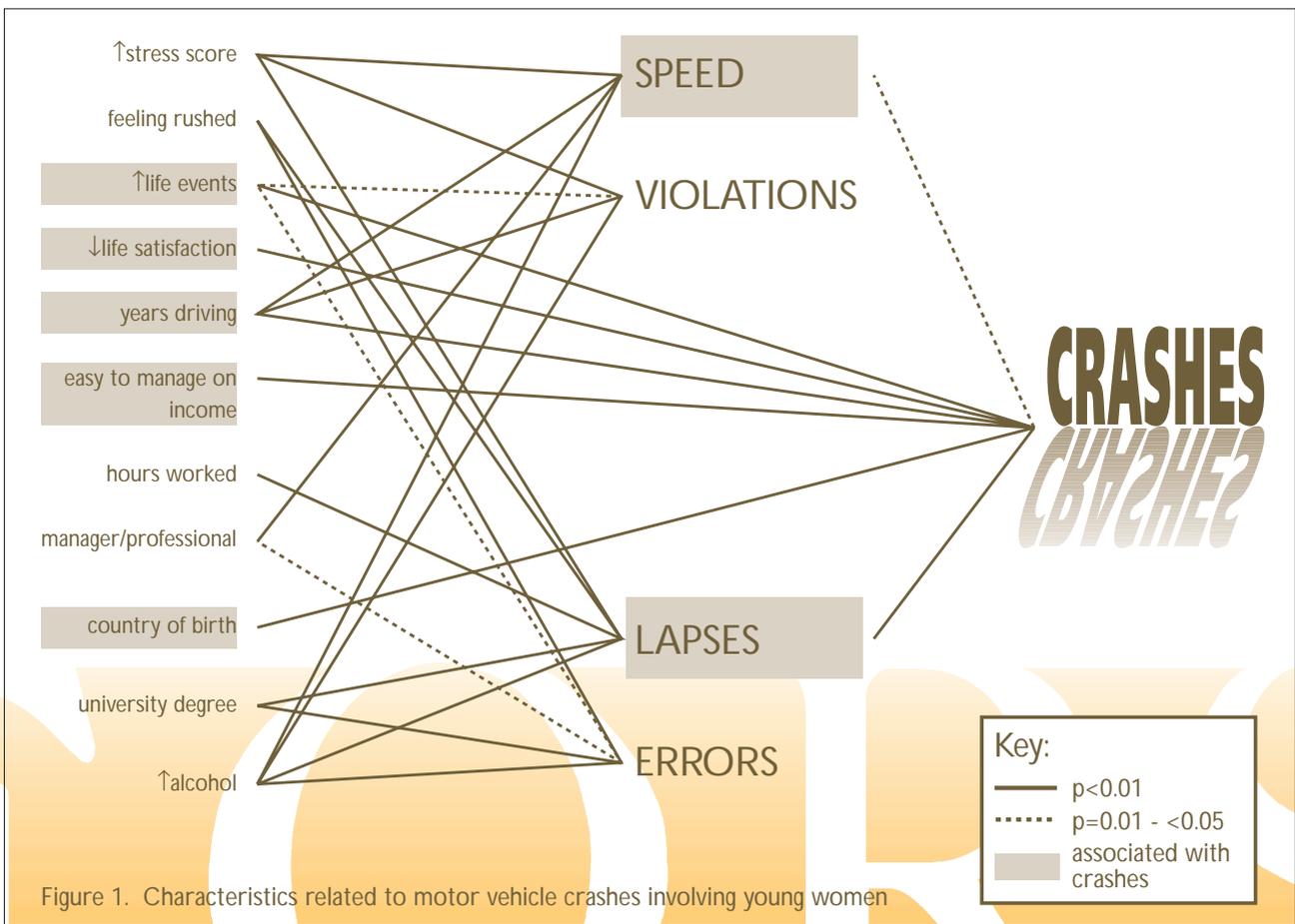


Figure 1. Characteristics related to motor vehicle crashes involving young women

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the participants

	Young (N=1425) %		Young (N=1425) %
Marital status		Education (highest qualification)	
Married, defacto	21.5	School certificate or less	11.4
Separated, divorced, widowed	0.8	Higher school certificate	56.2
Single	76.6	Trade or college certificate	19.2
Missing	1.1	University degree	12.3
		Missing	0.9
Country of birth		Employment Status	
Australia	92.1	Full time	36.2
Other English speaking	3.0	Part time/casual	18.2
Non-English speaking	3.7	No paid work	44.8
Missing	1.2	Missing	0.8

aim was to explore factors associated with the risk of road crashes for female drivers in Australia. This Monograph is concerned with the results for younger women.

A questionnaire was mailed to 2,700 women in April 1997. It included questions about: driving patterns; behaviour in relation to social functions where alcohol is served; items from the Driver Behaviour Questionnaire (DBQ); speed-related items from the Driving Style Questionnaire (DSQ); 'thoroughness' items from the Decision Making Questionnaire (DMQ); and crash history in the last three years. Completed questionnaires were received from 1621 young women (61%), of whom 1425, were drivers. Social and demographic characteristics of the participants were taken from the WHA survey which was conducted one year before the driving survey and are summarised in Table 1.

Results

Scores for errors and violations (from the Driver Behaviour Questionnaire, DBQ) and speed (from the Driving Style Questionnaire, DSQ) were higher in the young women, who also had higher reported rates of crashes in the last three years (1.87 per 100,000 km) than the mid-age women (0.59 per 100,000 km). The

young women drivers were more likely than the mid-age drivers to be 'at fault' and were also more likely to report speeding, tailgating and overtaking on the inside lane. The results suggest a picture of young women who are impatient drivers.

In the young women, lapse scores on the DBQ were significantly associated with crashes. These scores were higher in young women who had reported high levels of stress, feeling rushed, higher usual alcohol consumption, and tertiary education in the WHA survey. Young women with fewer years of driving experience, lower life satisfaction scores and those born in non-English speaking countries were also more likely to be involved in crashes. The results are given in Figure 1.

The crashes reported in this study were predominantly of low severity and some caution should be applied in extrapolating the results to high severity crashes where additional factors may be involved. Nonetheless the findings could be used to inform the development of strategies for reduction of road crashes among women drivers.

First, young women drivers display a number of intentional high-risk behaviours such as speeding, tailgating and overtaking on the inside lane. While

there have been some attempts to target young women drivers in media campaigns (eg the Federal Office of Road Safety's 'Rethink Your Second Drink' promotion), these campaigns could be refined in light of the study findings, to include some of the high risk behaviours reported by young women. These behaviours might also be the focus of specific enforcement programs.

Second, the study also found that women who were stressed or had low satisfaction with their lives were at increased risk of crash involvement. There is a need for further research to consider the mechanism through which lifestyle characteristics are transferred into increased risk and to identify the type of road safety countermeasures that may be appropriate to this issue.

Finally, women born overseas had higher rates of crash involvement, approximately twice that of Australian born women. This finding certainly requires further investigation to identify whether this is due to difficulties in transferring driving skills acquired in another country (ie changing from driving on the right hand side of the road to driving on the left hand side), difficulties in acquiring driving skills in Australia, or to other culturally related factors.