

# ROAD BEHAVIOUR OF UNLICENSED MOTORISTS INVOLVED IN FATAL CRASHES

Australian roads feature a disturbingly high incidence of unlicensed driving, and crashes involving these motorists make a significant contribution to Australia's road casualty statistics, including about one in every eleven road fatalities.

Monograph 20 of this series examined the incidence of unlicensed motorists in fatal crashes. It showed the worst offenders to be motor cycle riders, males, those aged below 25, the unemployed, and those travelling in remote regions and in the Northern Territory. Monograph 21 examines the road behaviour of unlicensed motorists involved in fatal crashes. It is based on information derived from coroners' records about fatal crashes in 1992 and 1994.

## Road behaviour

A 1990 Western Australian study<sup>(1)</sup> of disqualified and suspended motorists reported that those who admitted to driving whilst under disqualification or suspension (36 per cent) made special efforts at law abiding road use in an attempt to avoid detection. Tables 1 to 4 point to a contrary behaviour pattern, however, amongst those unlicensed drivers who become involved in fatal crashes. The 280 unlicensed motorists

**Table 1 Sobriety of licensed and unlicensed motorists involved in fatal crashes, 1992 and 1994**

	Number involved	Sobriety <sup>(a)</sup>		
		No intox'n	Moderate intox'n	High intox'n
Disqualified	82	30%	11%	59%
Other unlicensed	198	47%	21%	32%
All unlicensed	280	42%	18%	40%
Licensed <sup>(b)</sup>	4452	83%	7%	10%

(a) For motorists for whom BAC was recorded. Classified as follows:

- 'No intoxication' if BAC below 0.050 gm/100ml,
- 'Moderate intoxication' if BAC 0.050 to 0.149 gm/100ml,
- 'High intoxication' if BAC 0.150 gm/100ml or greater,

(b) Includes motorists for whom licence details are unknown.

**Table 2 Speeding amongst licensed and unlicensed motorists involved in fatal crashes, 1992 and 1994**

	Number involved	Speed category <sup>(a)</sup>		
		Not speeding	Possibly speeding	Speeding/too fast <sup>(b)</sup>
Unlicensed	280	39%	16%	45%
Licensed <sup>(c)</sup>	4452	76%	8%	16%

(a) For motorists for whom vehicle speed characteristics were recorded.

(b) Either speeding or driving too fast for conditions.

(c) Includes motorists for whom licence details are unknown.

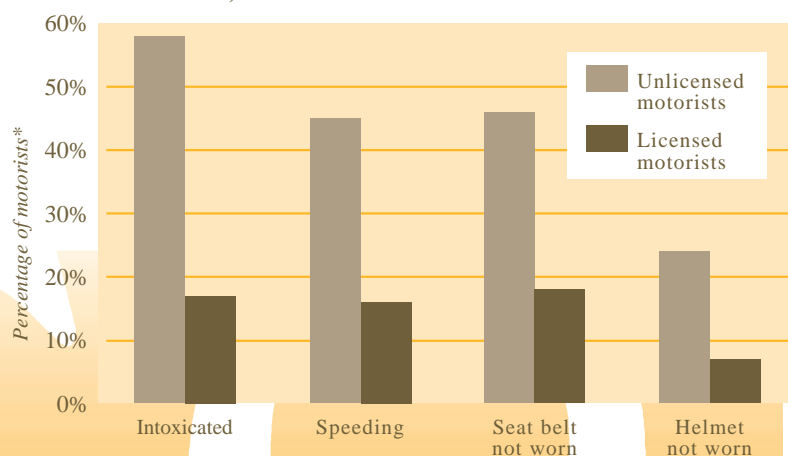
involved in fatal crashes in 1992 and 1994 were characterised by high levels of irresponsible road use. Figure 1 summarises these results.

The unlicensed motorists were more commonly intoxicated than their licensed

counterparts. About 18 per cent were moderately intoxicated and 40 per cent were highly intoxicated (Table 1). Intoxication was particularly prevalent amongst disqualified motorists, perhaps reflecting a high representation of recidivist drink-drivers in that group.

The unlicensed motorists were also more commonly speeding or driving too fast for road conditions (45%). Unlicensed drivers were more commonly not wearing seat belts (46%) and unlicensed motor cycle riders were more commonly unhelmeted (24%).

**Figure 1 Irresponsible road use amongst licensed and unlicensed motorists in fatal crashes, 1992 and 1994**



\* Percentage amongst those motorists for whom road use behaviour was recorded.

## Crash fault

In view of the road behaviour of unlicensed motorists involved in fatal crashes, it would not be surprising to find that they are more commonly responsible for these crashes. Table 5 confirms this for motorists involved in fatal multiple-vehicle crashes in 1992 and 1994.

**Table 3 Seat belt use amongst licensed and unlicensed drivers in fatal crashes, 1992 and 1994**

	Number involved	Seat belt use <sup>(a)</sup>	
		Worn	Not worn
Unlicensed	204	54%	46%
Licensed <sup>(b)</sup>	4129	82%	18%

(a) For drivers for whom belt use recorded.  
(b) Includes drivers for whom licence details are unknown.

**Table 4 Helmet use by licensed and unlicensed motor cycle riders in fatal crashes, 1992/1994**

	Number involved	Helmet use <sup>(a)</sup>	
		Worn	Not worn
Unlicensed	76	76%	24%
Licensed <sup>(b)</sup>	323	93%	7%

(a) For riders for whom helmet use recorded.  
(b) Includes riders for whom licence details are unknown.

Whereas 77 per cent of unlicensed drivers were fully or partially responsible for the crashes in which they were involved, this was the case for only 44 per cent of licensed drivers. Similarly, 87 per cent of unlicensed motor cycle riders were responsible for the crashes in which they were involved, but this was the case for only 59 per cent of licensed riders.

Similarly, Table 6 shows that unlicensed drivers and riders are more likely than licensed drivers and riders to be responsible for the single-vehicle crashes in which they are involved.

Also, in crashes involving pedestrian fatalities in 1992 and 1994 (not tabulated) some 64 per cent of unlicensed motorists were fully or partially responsible for the crash compared with 27 per cent of licensed motorists.

Overall, 250 of the 280 unlicensed motorists involved in fatal crashes were either fully or partially at fault. In contrast, only 2,392 of the 4,431 licensed motorists involved in fatal crashes were at fault. This suggests that an unlicensed motorist in a fatal crash is about seven times more likely to be at fault than is a licensed motorist.

## Tackling the problem

Future technological advances might one day see motor vehicles equipped with ignition interlock devices to prevent them operating without the appropriate driver's licence. For now, reducing the incidence of unlicensed driving must rely on measures to heighten the perceived perils associated with this activity. There is also a need to target specifically at hard-core recidivist drink drivers. Measures canvassed amongst road safety practitioners include:

- Australia-wide introduction of compulsory licence carriage when in charge of a motor vehicle<sup>(2)</sup>,
- licence checks to be routinely included in roadside RBT operations<sup>(2)</sup>,
- fines for unlicensed driving to be increased to significantly more than the costs of obtaining a licence,
- heightened use of mass media campaigns directed at modifying

public attitudes towards unlicensed driving,

- heightened priority to police enforcement of licence disqualification and enforcement of conditions applying to special licences, and
- widespread introduction of ignition interlocks for alcohol offenders.

## References:

- 1 Smith, D and G Maisey. *Survey of driving by disqualified and suspended drivers in Western Australia. Report CR94, Federal Office of Road Safety, Canberra (1990).*
- 2 *National Road Safety Action Plan 1996, published by the Federal Office of Road Safety on behalf of the National Road Safety Strategy Implementation Task Force.*
- 3 Watson, BC (1997) *The crash involvement of unlicensed drivers in Queensland. Proceedings of 1997 Road Safety and Enforcement Conference, Hobart.*
- 4 Harrison, WA (1997) *An exploratory investigation of the crash involvement of disqualified drivers and motorcyclists. Journal of Safety Research, Vol 28, No. 2.*

**Table 5 Crash fault amongst licensed and unlicensed motorists involved in fatal multiple vehicle crashes, 1992 and 1994**

	Number involved	Crash fault <sup>(a)</sup>	
		Fault <sup>(b)</sup>	No fault
<b>Drivers</b>			
Unlicensed	69	77%	23%
Licensed <sup>(c)</sup>	2439	44%	56%
<b>Motor cycle riders</b>			
Unlicensed	30	87%	13%
Licensed <sup>(c)</sup>	190	59%	41%

(a) For motorists for whom crash fault was recorded.  
(b) Either fully or partially at fault.  
(c) Includes motorists for whom licence details are unknown.

**Table 6 Crash fault amongst licensed and unlicensed motorists involved in fatal single vehicle crashes, 1992 and 1994**

	Number involved	Crash fault <sup>(a)</sup>	
		Fault <sup>(b)</sup>	No fault
<b>Drivers</b>			
Unlicensed	121	97%	3%
Licensed <sup>(c)</sup>	1035	90%	10%
<b>Motor cycle riders</b>			
Unlicensed	46	96%	4%
Licensed <sup>(c)</sup>	116	94%	6%

(a) For motorists for whom crash fault was recorded.  
(b) Either fully or partially at fault.  
(c) Includes motorists for whom licence details are unknown.