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THE IMPACT OF TRAINING YOUNG DRIVERS IN DRIVING SCHOOLS ON ROAD SAFETY

Key Words

Young drivers

Road safety

Driving school

Traffic accidents

Abstract

Road traffic accidents are the leading cause of death for young people worldwide. In the Republic of Croatia, young drivers cause a total of 9.6% of all road traffic accidents and 12.5% of road traffic accidents resulting in fatalities. Such unfavourable statistics point to the need to conduct research into the causes of road traffic accidents attributable to young drivers, including the possibilities of reducing these accidents and the loss of young lives. For this purpose, a survey was conducted on a sample of 740 young drivers from all over Croatia. The respondents were asked about their habits and behaviour after starting independent driving, about the consequences of reckless behaviour on the roads, the use of alcohol and narcotic drugs, and the use of mobile phones while driving. In addition, young drivers were asked to assess the quality of the three training courses they completed at the driving school and their opinion on the need for changes and improvements in training. The results of the research led to conclusions regarding the measures required to increase the quality of training of young drivers, as well as regarding optimal and viable solutions for raising awareness among young drivers, greater preparedness to drive alone, the development of traffic culture among young people, and consequently greater road safety.

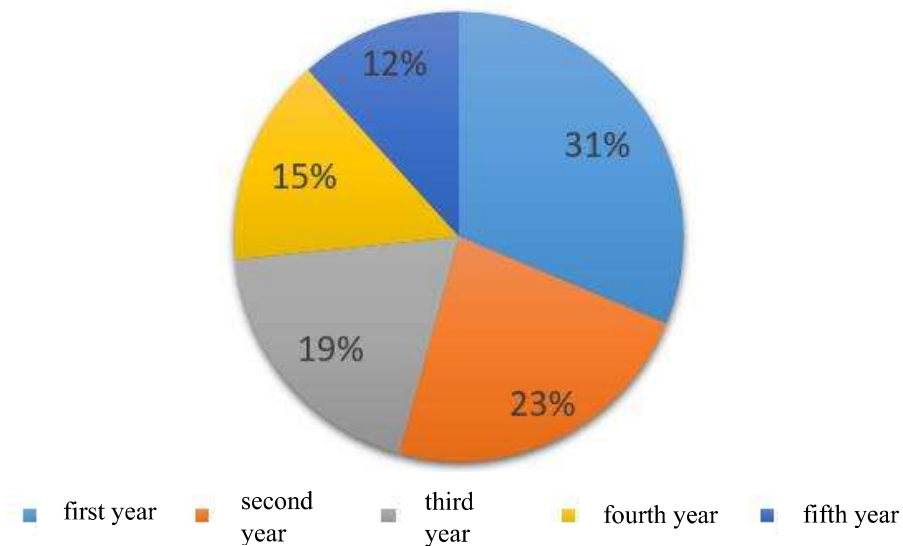
1. INTRODUCTION

With almost 1.3 million people dying in road traffic every year, the incidence rate in Croatia is 10.4 per 100,000 inhabitants. It is estimated that by 2030, road traffic accidents will have become the fifth leading cause of death globally. Young drivers make up about 8% of the driving population and account for an excessive percentage in all statistics related to road traffic accidents. In fact, young drivers are twice or three times as likely as more experienced drivers to cause a road traffic accident. For each young driver killed in a road traffic accident, averagely 1.3 people (passengers and other road users) also die in the same road traffic accident. Novice drivers thus present a great challenge in improving road safety considering that the mistakes they make when driving a vehicle result in as many as about 15% of the total number of road deaths. Often without thinking about the consequences, young people take lightly the risks of irresponsible behaviour behind the wheel. Inexperience, overconfidence, speeding, and the use of narcotic drugs and alcohol are just some of the factors contributing to the excessive number of road traffic accidents of young drivers. The level of education of young drivers on road safety, the amount of effort put into raising their awareness of the risks of driving and the necessary culture of driving behaviour, including the level of knowledge they actually have at the time of obtaining a driver's license, is of the greatest concern. Therefore, it is necessary to examine the quality of training provided by driving schools and try to improve it as much as possible as this will prevent accidents of young drivers and increase road safety in general.

2. ROAD SAFETY FOR YOUNG DRIVERS IN CROATIA

In terms of acquiring driving skills, young people have an advantage over older people because of their high level of psychophysical abilities enabling them to master the driving technique much faster, have better reflexes, and gain understanding of traffic rules and regulations more easily compared to older people. However, as a result of their lack of experience and their underestimation of the potential risks involved, younger and inexperienced drivers are slower in terms of assessing potentially risky situations in road traffic, perceiving road traffic in general, and detecting possible hazards in time. Furthermore, the problems that occur with young drivers in road traffic include their poor assessment of their own present psychophysical abilities to drive. The use of alcohol, narcotic drugs, and psychoactive substances, including fatigue, leads to lower self-control of behaviour in young people. The urge to take more risks to impress another person is also a major factor leading to accidents. For the majority of young people, this urge is stronger than the need to comply with traffic regulations, often compelling young drivers to press the accelerator pedal too much and exceed the speed limits without considering the risks involved. If a young driver in a vehicle is carrying multiple passengers who are the driver's peers, the driver focuses more on laughter, conversation, loud music, and all in-vehicle entertainment than on the monitoring of traffic in front of and around the vehicle.

Consequently, the young driver fails to notice the hazardous situation, either in time or at all, and thus is not able to react promptly and properly. Nowadays, young drivers' attention is mostly diverted by modern technology: talking on mobile phones, texting, posting content on social networks while driving, selecting and changing music on the radio, etc. Research shows that using a mobile phone while driving is equivalent to drink-driving, or even worse. The reaction time while using a mobile phone is longer than the reaction time of a person with blood alcohol level of 0.8%. According to statistics, the majority of accidents caused by young drivers occurred on Saturdays and the majority of people died on Sundays. In terms of the time of the day, the majority of accidents occurred between 12:00 pm and 04:00 pm, and the majority of people died between 08:00 pm and 12:00 am. The most common type of road traffic accidents caused by young drivers refers to the vehicle skidding off the road (26.64%), as a result of which 221 people have died in the last 10 years in Croatia.



Graph 1. Accidents of young drivers by years after taking the driving test

The most common cause of accidents among young drivers is speed unsuitable for road conditions which, compared to other causes, accounts for as many as 42.38% of accidents that resulted in as many as 284 fatalities in the period from 2010 to 2019.

In 2020, a total of 5925 young drivers were involved in some type of road traffic accident. Graph 1 shows the percentage of accidents by years after taking the driving test.

3. RESEARCH INTO THE HABITS AND BEHAVIOR OF YOUNG DRIVERS AFTER THEY START INDEPENDENT DRIVING

A survey was conducted on a sample of 740 young drivers from across Croatia who were asked about their opinion on the training process in driving schools, about

driving techniques and habits, the consequences of irresponsible behaviour and about their understanding of legal provisions related to young drivers.

3.1. The impact of training young drivers in road safety in driving schools

In the process of training provided by driving schools, young drivers gain knowledge about traffic rules and regulations, including the provision of first aid to people injured in road traffic accidents. They also acquire driving skills, learn about traffic culture and importance of showing consideration for other road users, as well as about safe and cautious driving. However, house manners, instilled behaviour, qualities and traits largely determine driving patterns and responsibilities in road traffic after a young driver passes the driving test and starts driving independently. It is thus important to explore methods on how to affect awareness among young people, improve training and ensure that young people, when they get their driving license, continue following the rules and behaviours taught in driving schools.

When asked about the quality of the training course on traffic regulations and safety rules, 45.9% of the respondents said they were not satisfied with the method of teaching because the candidates were taught only through examples of situations that were usually presented in the tests. Instead of wasting time on dull and unnecessary definitions, the instructors should focus on showing the candidates real everyday situations and using practical examples. The respondents said that there should be more videos with real cases, simulations and more modern presentations, including more interaction with the candidates in the lectures. The course on the provision of first aid was given the highest quality rating by only 35.2% of the candidates. The survey indicated inadequate lecturers and insufficient practical work as the most common shortcomings of that training course. The young drivers stated that the training course lacked interaction in lectures, and videos showing real-life situations. They said that future drivers should be taught and prepared psychologically how to stay calm in case of a road traffic accident. They stated that the training in the provision of first aid to the people injured should be done every few years. As the main reasons for dissatisfaction with the course on driving a vehicle, the respondents (47.7%) cited various flaws of driving instructors (bad behaviour, shouting, insults, lack of interest, etc.) and exceedingly long waiting time for the practical driving test after the completion of driving lessons (one month to take the driving test for the first time, and often up to two months to re-take the driving test).

3.2. Reckless behaviour on the roads

When asked about the use of narcotic drugs before driving, 6.9% of the respondents in the survey answered in the affirmative. As regards the use of alcohol, 36.4% of the respondents answered in the affirmative. This is a really high percentage, considering the draconian penalties for alcohol use and the fact that young drivers are forbidden to use even the smallest amounts of alcohol, i.e. they are required to have blood alcohol concentration of 0.00 g/kg. When asked whether they were

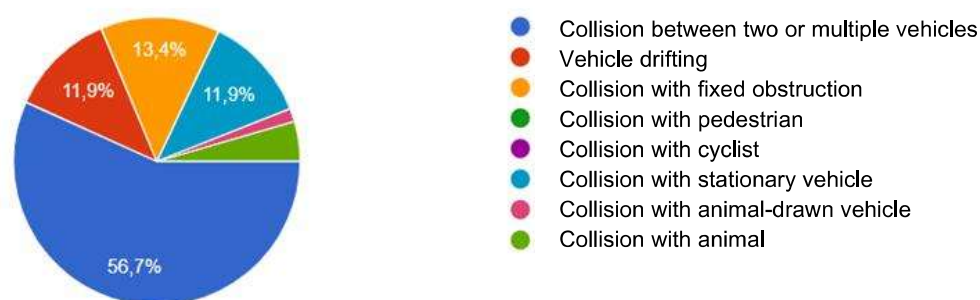
aware of this statutory provision, 97.1% of the respondents in the survey answered in the affirmative. Using a mobile phone while driving is very popular among young drivers since as many as 58.2% confirmed they were using their mobile phones while driving. Given that mobile phone use while driving is considered the fourth cause of fatal road accidents, the number of young drivers who answered in the affirmative is quite discouraging and troubling. Seat belt is used by 97.7% of young drivers, which is commendable, but this high percentage can also be attributed to newer vehicles that sound signals to warn of the mandatory fastening of seat belts.

The survey revealed that 50% of young drivers who caused a road traffic accident drank alcohol before driving, 15% used narcotic drugs, and as many as 74% of the respondents used a mobile phone while driving. These percentages are much higher than the percentages relevant to the same irresponsible behaviour of the respondents who did not cause a road traffic accident, which leads to the conclusion that the foregoing factors greatly contribute to causing road traffic accidents. Devastatingly, 29.6% of the respondents stated that the fine they received for causing a road traffic accident and violating traffic regulations did not prevent them from repeating the same mistakes or compel them to be more careful when driving. As many as 89% of the respondents answered in the affirmative to the question of whether they considered themselves safe drivers. Hence, even the accidents they caused did not dent their high self-confidence or motivate them not to overestimate their own driving skills.

When asked if they have ever hit a fixed obstacle or another parked vehicle without leaving their details or notifying the police (including the time before obtaining a driver's license), 14.8% of the respondents answered in the affirmative. This indicates the need for systematic education and training in moral values, consideration for others and increase in general knowledge and common courtesy.

3.3. Causes and types of road traffic accidents

With respect to the types of road traffic accidents caused by young drivers that took part in the survey, as many as 56.7% relate to the collision of two or more vehicles. Of all types of collisions, the most common one was a side collision with a vehicle (35.7%), followed by a rear-end collision (26.2%), a collision occurring when driving side by side (14.3%), a head-on collision and a back-up collision (each 11.9%).



Graph 2. Types of road traffic accidents caused by young drivers

The most common cause of road traffic accidents is tailgating (23.4%), followed by violation of the right of way and speed inappropriate for road conditions (17.2%).

4. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INCREASING ROAD SAFETY FOR YOUNG DRIVERS

Research conducted among young drivers has led to the conclusion that certain changes are critical in the process of training. This fact is demonstrated by the number of accidents caused by young drivers on Croatian roads. In addition to training provided by driving schools, grim statistics are also an outcome of young people's attitudes and behaviours resulting from house manners. With the current training programme, it is impossible to effect substantial changes in young people's behaviour, given the lack of teaching content that would bring about changes in unacceptable behaviour in traffic such as the need for young people to impress their peers by taking more risks in the company of their peers and reckless behaviour behind the wheel (alcohol, drugs, mobile phone use).

The results of the conducted surveys clearly indicate that changes are essential in delivering teaching content of the course on traffic regulations and safety rules and on the provision of first aid. The proposal of measures to improve teaching refers to the modernisation of lectures, simulations of real-life traffic situations, interactive participation in addressing demonstrated situations that can occur while driving, learning with understanding and not just by examples from the test. In that case, the lecturers would be more motivated without having to constantly repeat the same definitions and analyse the same situations shown on the pictures. The discussion and exchange of views would result in the transfer of greater knowledge to future young drivers. Considering that the research among young drivers showed that the course on driving is faced with a grave problem with the behaviour of certain instructors who lack patience or knowledge, the proposed solution is that the final exam for driving instructors is administered by an authorised professional organisation instead of private colleges currently administering the exams. This would avert the issuance of licenses without testing the acquired knowledge and driving skills of future instructors.

Great emphasis is placed on the need to introduce lectures on traffic culture in driving schools in order to try to influence young people's behaviour and attitudes with the aim of raising awareness of the consequences of their irresponsible behaviour on the roads. To this end, psychologists trained to work with young people should be included in the training process. Competent authorities (Ministry of the Interior), whose representatives would present statistics of road traffic accidents of young drivers, including their causes and consequences, should be engaged in the training process as well. Additionally, showing videos of road traffic accidents with severe consequences would be a good way to influence the behaviour and the minds of young drivers.

The survey conducted to investigate the extent to which young drivers are ready to drive independently shows the importance of young people's opinion about the methods and quality of training. Therefore, one of the proposed solutions is the

introduction of questionnaires and various surveys on satisfaction with training, and preparedness to drive independently after training as such measure would take into account the need for changes, criticism and suggestions of the majority of service users, which would undoubtedly lead to improved training of young drivers.

5. CONCLUSION

Surveys for the purpose of this research which were conducted on a sample of 740 young drivers from across Croatia point to the need for changes in the method of training provided by driving schools. In addition to the problem of insufficient number of driving lessons and other shortcomings of the training process itself, surveys also show the problem of irresponsible behaviour among young drivers; 58.3% of them stated that they used a mobile phone while driving, and as many as 36.4% drank alcohol before driving. These survey results demonstrate the risk that young drivers pose to road safety and indicate the need for constant efforts to find solutions to this problem.

The process of training young drivers in driving schools may have a number of shortcomings, but the entire blame for the grim statistics relevant to young drivers on the roads cannot be placed solely on driving schools and driving instructors. The problem also lies in the individual's own identity, personality traits, character, attitudes, temperament, upbringing and other characteristics. It is, therefore, very important to consider engaging psychologists in the training process. Part of the responsibility for the lack of training, and thus the bleak statistics relevant to young drivers, rests with the government. Plenty of challenges facing driving schools and young drivers require government assistance to streamline the whole training process, both financially and psychologically. If the government initiated any prevention programmes, as well as surveys of candidates for drivers and driving instructors, and carried through the necessary reforms on the basis of the received feedback, many shortcomings related to training would be minimised, resulting in increased road safety and reduced number of young people killed on the roads.

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