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Engaging the community: Limiting the road safety threats for novice drivers

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Drivers and motorbike riders under the age of 25 are overrepresented in crashes throughout the world. In Queensland, Australia, they accounted for 14 per cent of road fatalities and 20 per cent of hospitalisations in the five years 1998 to 2002, when they were only 7 per cent of the actual state population. During 2003, the Travelsafe Committee of the Queensland Parliament examined methods for reducing crashes among this vulnerable group. After examining research from around the world, the committee identified a number of potential interventions for novice drivers. These included control of late night driving, passenger carrying limitations, restricting the power of cars and motorbikes, limiting towing, and reducing the maximum speed limit for novice drivers and riders. Other measures considered by the committee included re-introducing P-plates to identify drivers and riders in the intermediate licensing stage, rewards for offence-free driving/riding, and testing novice drivers and riders before they can 'exit' to a full licence.

The committee identified at a very early stage in their work that the imposition of additional restrictions on young drivers and riders and the resultant impact on the mobility of young people would be a contentious issue. The committee placed great importance on public consultation processes for the inquiry to encourage informed debate and to involve groups and individuals with differing views in their inquiries.

The committee used a participatory research methodology to engage with the key stakeholders including pre-drivers, novice drivers, parent groups, government agencies and youth groups in order to test their reaction as well as seek their input. This consultative process provided information regarding their current road user behaviour and possible changes to this behaviour. From the information gathered during this consultation, the committee made recommendations to parliament to enhance the road safety benefits for novice drivers.

The involvement of, and consultation with, the community ensured that the inquiry outcomes were more relevant to the people of Queensland and not merely a transplantation of ideas from the licensing systems of other jurisdictions to the Queensland driver and rider licensing systems.

Introduction

The Travelsafe Committee is a select committee appointed by the Queensland Parliament to inquire into all aspects of road safety and public transport. The committee has an important role in researching and developing policy in order to reduce crashes in Queensland. In 2003, the committee focussed on young driver and rider issues. As in other parts of the world, young drivers and riders in Queensland have an elevated crash risk. The committee considered a range of education and training as well as licensing initiatives to reduce crashes amongst this group.

When conducting research, the committee focuses on the methods used. The committee believes that all Queenslanders should have the opportunity to participate in their inquiries. By doing this, the committee seeks to actively engage and empower the community. This type of research is known as 'participatory' research.

However, the committee does not rely only on the results of their participative research. Instead, they seek to use this type of research to augment existing 'positivistic' research. Positivistic research relies on the principle that reliable knowledge of phenomena reduces it to patterns that can help predict future experiences (Harre, 1981). Positivistic research enables the generalisation of results from the study to other situations. By comparison, participative research is context specific and encourages the involvement of those directly influenced by the research (Elden, 1981). The committee's use of participative research ensured that the committee's recommendations were relevant to Queensland and not merely a direct transplant of road safety ideas from other jurisdictions.

This paper examines the results of this research for four interventions:

- Late night driving restriction;
- Passenger restriction;
- Increasing the amount of supervised driving and riding practice prior to licensing; and
- L- and P- plates.

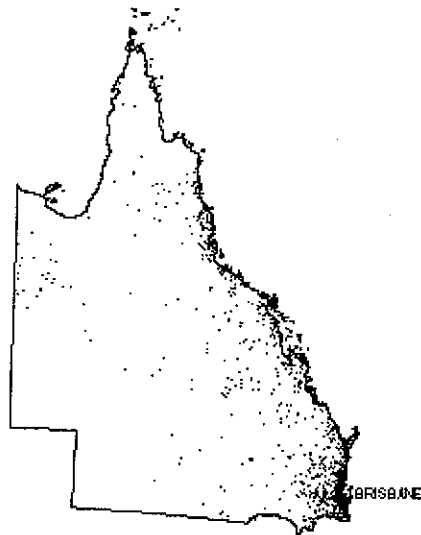
Context

Queensland

Queensland is Australia's second largest state, covering 1,722,000 km² (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1995) and it is the third most populous state with 19.2 per cent of Australia's population (Office of Economic and Statistical Research, 2004a).

Defining characteristics of Queensland include vast spaces and a decentralised population. Queensland has an average of 2 persons per square kilometre while the United Kingdom has an average of 238 people per square kilometre (Office of Economic and Statistical Research, 2004b). Figure 1 below shows the population distribution of Queensland. Each dot represents 1,000 people. As can be seen, apart from Brisbane in the south-east corner, most of the remaining population is located in coastal centres.

Figure 1: Population Distribution of Queensland, 2001



Source: Adapted from Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003.

The decentralised nature of Queensland means the car is the predominant mode of transport. Those living outside the south-east corner have limited access to public transport and the car is often the only form of transport available. Even in the most populated area, south-east Queensland, four of every five trips occur by car (Travelsafe Committee, 2002). In Queensland in 2001, 40 per cent of households had one vehicle, 33 per cent had two or more and 12 per cent had three or more (Office of Economic and Statistical Research, 2003).

The dependence of the Queensland population on private vehicles for transport means that road safety practitioners need to assess carefully options used in other jurisdictions that impact on private vehicle use and driving, to identify if they will work in Queensland. Interventions used successfully in other places will not necessarily work as effectively when transplanted to Queensland.

Travelsafe Committee

Parliamentary road safety committees have an important role in researching and developing policy (Peden, et al., 2004). The Travelsafe Committee of the 50th Queensland Parliament has seven members selected by the Parliament to examine all aspects of road safety and public transport (Queensland

Parliament, 2004a). The committee conducts detailed investigations, develops expertise in specific matters and then reports findings to the larger forum of parliament with recommendations. Travelsafe Committees have existed in Queensland since 1990 and have investigated a range of issues including drug driving and rural road safety during this time.

The Travelsafe Committee examined young driver and rider issues in 2003, conducting two inquiries. The first inquiry, *Reducing the road toll for young Queenslanders – is education enough?*, focussed on education and training initiatives. The second, *Inquiry into provisional driver and rider licence restrictions*, examined licensing initiatives (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a; Travelsafe Committee 2003b).

Young drivers have a higher crash risk than any other group of drivers (McKnight & McKnight, 2003). In November 2002, young drivers and riders (17 to 19) represented 3.5 per cent of all licensed Queensland drivers and riders (Queensland Transport, 2003). However, they accounted for 13.6 per cent of all reported crashes from 1998 to 2002.

After identifying the high crash risks of young novices, the committee focussed on finding solutions that would ameliorate the risks in Queensland. The committee mainly focussed on interventions that could be used after solo driving commenced. They grouped these into 'education and training initiatives' and 'licence restrictions' (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a; Travelsafe Committee 2003b). The committee considered interventions such as:

- Post-licence education and training;
- Supervised practice during the learner phase;
- Lengthening the learner phase;
- The introduction of L- and P-plates
- Late night driving restriction;
- Passenger restriction;
- Speed restriction;
- Vehicle power restriction;
- Towing restriction;
- Hazard perception test; and
- Offence-free periods and other incentives.

This paper will focus on only four of the interventions considered by the committee, a late night driving restriction, passenger restriction, increasing the amount of supervised practice prior to licensing and the use of L- and P-plates.

The theoretical framework

Community psychology and empowerment

The committee completed their participative research within a community psychology framework. Community psychology seeks to examine 'real world' problems and then develop solutions for these problems (Tolan, Chertok, Keys & Jason, 1990). Community psychology does this by focussing on the context-bound nature of information (Kelly, 1984; Reigel, 1976); the usefulness of differing views and solutions (Rappaport, 1981; Seidman, 1983) and the need to highlight processes (how work is done) as well as content (what is done) (Chavis, Stucky & Wandersman, 1983).

Creating meaningful social change is difficult for three reasons. Firstly, bigger problems are generally more difficult to solve because they tend to involve more people, money and vested interests (Shadish, 1990). Secondly, bigger interventions are more likely to have bigger effects but they are also less likely to be feasible. Finally, it is easier to implement interventions consistent with the values of the existing systems. However, these interventions are less likely to make a real difference (Shadish, 1990). Therefore, small problems can be solved with small interventions and small adjustments creating small effects. This will work in the short term. However, this will not create long-term changes as the system and its underlying values essentially stay the same (Shadish, 1990).

A parliamentary committee is in a unique position regarding social change. As they make recommendations to the Parliament, who in turn make legislation, parliamentary committees have the potential to stimulate changes that have a wide-ranging impact. As an example, the New South Wales equivalent of the Travelsafe Committee, the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Road Safety was instrumental in the introduction and full implementation of random breath testing, which led to a 20% reduction in deaths in that state, in the 1980s (Peden et al., 2004).

The Travelsafe Committee wanted to make a long-term change to young driver and rider crash risks and, therefore, favoured the importance of problem solving over ease of implementation of the measures. This meant that the committee considered a range of measures that many individuals and organisations believed were inappropriate due to the difficulties in their implementation. However, the committee believed that without considering such measures, any long-term reduction in young novice driver and rider crashes would be difficult to achieve.

One proposed goal of social interventions is empowerment (Rappaport, 1990). Empowerment suggests that society's outsiders should benefit from research. Researchers should conduct empowering research using collaborative methods that give affected groups a voice. They should also allow for paradoxical and qualitative understanding (Rappaport, 1990).

The committee identified that imposing additional restrictions on young drivers and riders that would reduce their mobility would be a contentious issue. They also identified that young drivers and riders as well as those who were soon to be young drivers and riders (some of whom were too young to vote) were a disempowered group. The committee actively sought to consult with these people and by doing so, empower them. However, the committee's consultation processes did not just empower young people. The committee actively sought the opinion of people of all ages and backgrounds living outside metropolitan Brisbane. These people were unlikely to have access to alternative sources of transportation such as public transport. They were also more likely to need to drive a vehicle to access employment and recreational opportunities. The committee also consulted with parent groups, government agencies, youth councils/organisations and driver trainers and educators.

Participative research

The key aims of participative research are social change and to include 'research subjects' in the planning and implementation of change (Mumby, 1988, p.148). This type of research suits the goals of community psychology. The committee's research was participative as the focus of the research was social change in the form of introducing countermeasures to reduce the crash risk of young drivers and riders. They sought to involve young people and others likely to be affected, such as parents, in this change process.

Table 1 below compares two types of research, positivistic and participative. The majority of road safety research is positivistic research that examines problems traditionally by attempting to 'extract' information from subjects and then generalising that information to other contexts. The subjects have little control over the research and in some cases may be actively misled as in blind research (Reinharz, 1981).

Participative research is used minimally in road safety research. Participative research involves the researchers and participants working together more in co-researcher style. They work to produce the social change together (Elden, 1981).

This paper is not arguing that participative research is the best method of research for road safety but rather that it complements research which uses traditional methods to investigate problems. It helps identify if various options are suitable to a particular jurisdiction, empowers participants and educates the public about potential countermeasures.

Table 1: Comparisons between positivistic research and participative research

	Type of research	
	<i>Positivistic research</i>	<i>Participative research</i>
Research goal	Abstract general knowledge (context-free knowledge)	Local theory, actionable, generalisable (context-bound knowledge)
Who learns from the research in the first instance?	The social science community (usually but not exclusively other researchers)	Participants (usually but not exclusively workers & researchers)
Likelihood that those who supply the data will use the results	Very low	High
Relation between researcher and researchee(s)	Theoretician ↔ Object	Colleague ↔ Colleague
Researcher role	Producer of distant learning	Co-producer of learning and therefore of change

Source: Adapted from Elden, (1981), p. 263.

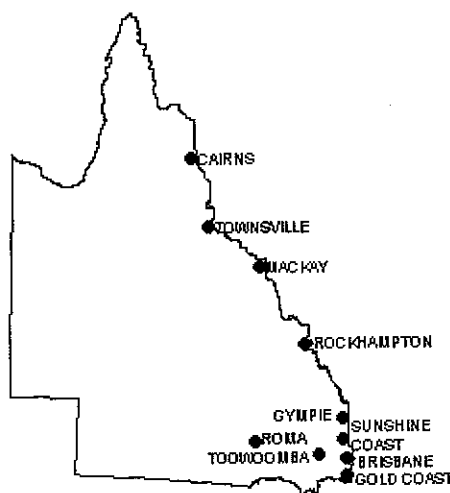
Method

The committee conducted a range of activities to encourage the public, particularly young people and those from outside the metropolitan area, to participate. For the *Inquiry into provisional driver and rider licence restrictions*, the committee released an issues paper to promote informed discussion and encourage submissions. The committee published this issues paper on their website as well as distributing over 1,000 hard copies to interested groups and individuals. They also placed advertisements in newspapers throughout Queensland and on youth websites to encourage submissions (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a; Travelsafe Committee 2003b).

The committee received 52 submissions to the first inquiry into education and training and a further 45 submissions for the inquiry into provisional licence restrictions (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a; Travelsafe Committee 2003b).

Between 20 May and 14 August 2003, the committee hosted 11 young driver forums. The committee conducted these forums in locations, both in and around the capital, Brisbane, in major regional centres and in a rural centre (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a; Travelsafe Committee 2003b). Figure 2 shows these locations.

Figure 2: Young driver and rider forum locations, Queensland, 2003



At the conclusion of each forum, the committee invited participants to complete a response form to provide further feedback on the issues discussed. The response form was not designed to be statistically valid, but to provide an indication of the views of those who attended the forums (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a; Travelsafe Committee 2003b).

To conclude its public consultation for the inquiries, the committee held a public hearing in Brisbane. The committee invited key interest groups to give evidence. These included:

- Driver trainers and educators who lodged submissions;
- Royal Automobile Club of Queensland (the organisation representing motorists in Queensland);
- Queensland Transport (the government transport department);
- Queensland Police Service;
- State Youth Advisory Council (a body of young people created to advise government on issues affecting young people); and
- Centre for Accident Research and Road Safety – Queensland (a university research centre).

Members of the State Youth Advisory Council and staff of the Centre for Accident Research and Road Safety – Queensland were unable to attend the hearing. However, the committee met with a senior lecturer from the research centre to discuss the centre's research on young driver and rider issues pertinent to the inquiries (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a; Travelsafe Committee 2003b). Committee staff briefed the State Youth Advisory Council on the inquiries.

To supplement their work in Queensland, the committee also travelled to Sydney and Melbourne to meet with road safety researchers, training and education practitioners, representatives from the automotive industry, motoring organisations and departments administering the Victorian and New South Wales governments' driver and rider training and licensing policies.

The committee's conclusions and recommendations are based on the outcomes of the public consultation processes, the committee's investigations and its consideration of best practice road safety research (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a; Travelsafe Committee 2003b). The committee's research processes fit the ideals of community psychology, empowerment and participatory research.

Results

The committee considered a range of countermeasures, identified from the literature and practices in other jurisdictions, to reduce young novice driver and rider crashes (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a; Travelsafe Committee 2003b). This paper examines four of these countermeasures, a late night driving restriction, a passenger restriction, increasing the amount of supervised practice prior to licensing and the introduction of L- and P-plates. This section outlines the research considered by the committee, the results of their participative research activities and the committee's recommendations relating to the countermeasures.

Late night driving restriction

The committee were encouraged by the reported effectiveness of late night driver restrictions in other jurisdictions. Research supports the effectiveness of a late night driving restriction in reducing crashes (Begg, Stephenson, Alsop & Langley, 2001; Mayhew, Simpson, Williams & Desmond, 2002; Shope & Molnar, 2003). A late night driving restriction aims to reduce the probability that a provisional licence holder will have a serious crash (Lin & Fearn, 2003). The committee's public consultation aimed to identify the suitability of this countermeasure for young drivers and riders in Queensland. As shown in Table 2, people and organisations who made submissions, attended the forums or the public hearing tended to have strong, polarised views regarding this measure.

Table 2: Summary of views regarding a late night driving restriction from submissions, forums and the hearing

Submissions	Forums	Hearing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Difficulties in accessing employment and education opportunities/commitments. • Particular difficulties for people living in rural areas. • Increase the transport burden on family and friends. • Enforcement and compliance concerns. • Several submissions supported the restriction provided there were exemptions available. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seventy per cent disagreed, 17 per cent agreed and 12 per cent were uncertain regarding a night driving restriction (from 9.00pm until 6.00am with exemptions for special cases. • Fifty-seven per cent disagreed, 29 per cent agreed and 14 per cent were uncertain regarding a night driving curfew from midnight until 5.00am for the first six months of a provisional licence with exemptions for special cases. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One motoring organisation (Royal Automobile Club of Queensland – RACQ) supported a late night driving restriction for the first six to twelve months of driving to reduce exposure to risky situations. • Government departments suggested that effects on access, equity and enforcement need further consideration.

Despite strong opposition from some individuals and groups, the committee decided that a late night driving restriction is an important component of a modern graduated licensing scheme. The public consultation guided the way the committee structured their recommended restriction to ensure there was minimal impact on education, work and other essential travel by provisionally licensed drivers and riders (Travelsafe Committee, 2003b). The committee decided to recommend the introduction of a late night driving/riding restriction for provisionally licensed drivers and riders under 25 years. The restriction would operate between midnight and 4.00am for the first year of driving or riding on a provisional licence, with exemptions for legitimate reasons and for drivers and riders accompanied by the holder of an open licence (Travelsafe Committee, 2003b). The committee also recommended that provisional drivers and riders be encouraged to limit their driving and riding at night (Travelsafe Committee, 2003b).

Passenger restriction

Passenger restrictions have the dual aim of reducing risk-taking behaviour and the number of individuals and potential injuries if a crash occurred (McKnight & Peck, 2003). Positivistic research has identified the effectiveness of this type of restriction in reducing crashes (Begg, et al., 2001). As shown in table 3, the committee's public consultation process identified the unpopularity of this measure.

Table 3: Summary of views regarding a passenger restriction from submissions, forums and the hearing

Submissions	Forums	Hearing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many submissions disagreed citing reasons such as the effect on car-pooling, designated driver programs, personal safety concerns and the inability to transport family members. • A minority of submissions supported the restriction believing it would reduce peer pressure and distractions. • Some supported applying passenger restrictions to those who broke the law or contributed to a crash. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fifty-nine per cent disagreed, 28 per cent agreed and 14 per cent were uncertain regarding a passenger restriction for the first six months of a provisional licence with exemptions for special cases. • Forty-eight per cent disagreed, 27 per cent agreed and 25 per cent were uncertain about applying a passenger restriction to those drivers who committed a serious traffic offence. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The RACQ suggested a passenger restriction apply for the first 6 to 12 months for drivers under a certain age. • The Queensland Police Service raised enforcement as an important issue.

While the committee noted research highlighting the effectiveness of a passenger restriction in reducing crashes, they also considered the strong community concern regarding its effect on car-pooling, designated driver programs and the transportation of family members (Travelsafe Committee, 2003b). For these reasons, they decided not to recommend a universal passenger restriction. Instead, they decided to recommend the introduction of a peer passenger restriction that only applies to provisionally licensed drivers under the age of 25 years who lose their licence through the accumulation of traffic offences. By doing this, the committee hoped to encourage all provisional drivers and riders to drive and ride safely. A peer passenger is defined as an individual from 17 to 25 years (Travelsafe Committee, 2003b). The committee also recommended encouraging provisionally licensed drivers and riders to limit voluntarily the amount of driving that occurs with passengers present during their initial solo driving months (Travelsafe Committee, 2003b).

Increasing the amount of supervised driving and riding practice prior to licensing

Increasing the amount of supervised driving and riding practice dramatically reduces crash risks once solo driving or riding commences (Travelsafe, 2003a). Individuals learning to drive under supervision have very low crash risks (Williams, Preusser, Ferguson & Ulmer, 1997). Increasing the length of the learner period and the amount of supervised experience during this period may reduce crash risk (McKnight & Peck, 2002). The committee's research showed that using strategies to increase the amount of supervised driving and riding practice was more popular than the previous two restrictions discussed. This is evident in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Summary of views regarding increased supervision from submissions, forums and the hearing

Submissions	Forums	Hearing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 120 hours of supervised practice is ideal but may be difficult to achieve. • Other suggestions include a minimum of 50 hours, 75 hours or 100 hours. • Difficulties include lack of time, balancing school and driving practice commitments as well as limited access to a vehicle. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sixteen per cent disagreed while 60 per cent supported increased supervised driving practice during the learner phase. Twenty-three per cent were uncertain. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Queensland Transport and the RACQ suggested that 120 hours of supervised practice is ideal.

While the committee noted that 120 hours was considered ideal, they also noted the practical impediments raised such as lack of access to a vehicle. For this reason, the committee were reluctant to

prescribe 120 hours as a compulsory requirement. The committee were also concerned about prescribing a shorter period without knowing how many hours learners currently complete before attempting their provisional licence. For instance, if many learners are currently completing 60 hours and the committee recommended 50 hours, many parents and learners may believe that 50 hours was the ideal target. As a result, there could be a negative effect.

Therefore, the committee recommended that Queensland Transport continue to encourage learner drivers and riders to achieve 120 hours of supervised driving and riding practice in a range of conditions (i.e. it is not a compulsory requirement) (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a). They also recommended lowering the minimum age to obtain a learner licence from 16 + years to 16 years while maintaining the minimum age to obtain a provisional licence at 17 years. This would effectively double the minimum length of time the youngest learners had to gain supervised experience (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a).

L- and P-plates

L-plates are displayed on vehicles learners drive or ride while under supervision (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a). P-plates indicate that the driver or rider is provisionally licensed (Travelsafe Committee, 2003b). Queensland is the only Australian state not to require learner drivers and riders, under private supervision, to display L-plates and provisionally licensed drivers and riders to display P-plates. The committee did not identify positivistic research linking the display of L- and P-plates with reduced crash risk. However, they noted research showing that the enforcement of P-plates increases compliance with other licensing restrictions (Triggs & Smith, 1996). As shown in Table 5, the committee's public consultation indicated mixed support for L- and P-plates. However, there was more public support for plates than for other countermeasures considered such as the late night driving and passenger restrictions.

Table 5: Summary of views regarding L- and P- plates from submissions, forums and the hearing

Submissions	Forums	Hearing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mixed support from the submissions. • L- and P-plates may encourage negative images and perceptions of young people. • They will also provide a visual cue for other drivers and encourage learner and provisional drivers to comply with other restrictions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thirty-seven percent disagreed, 42 per cent agreed and 21 per cent were uncertain about the introduction of P-plates. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible to use the removal of P-plates as an incentive. • Plates will help with enforcing restrictions.

The committee concluded that the benefits of displaying plates, such as encouraging compliance with other licence restrictions and national uniformity, outweighed the disadvantages. They recommended that all vehicles driven by a learner driver or rider should display L-plates (Travelsafe Committee, 2003a). They also recommended the requirement that all provisionally licensed drivers and riders display P-plates (Travelsafe Committee, 2003b). The committee recommended that both plates be trialled initially, followed by a review that assesses the road safety and other impacts. The evaluation will ensure that the link between L- and P-plates and their effect on road safety is more accurately measured.

Discussion and conclusion

Positivistic research methods have an important role in road safety research. They manipulate variables, identify if countermeasures reduce crashes, are applicable to a range of situations and the studies should be capable of replication. However, this paper argues that other types of research, such as participative research also have an important role in road safety work.

The committee based their recommendations on positivistic research completed by other researchers as well as their own participative research. Acknowledging the symbiotic relationship between the two types of research ensured the committee considered a range of factors.

The committee commenced their young driver and rider inquiries with the following aims:

- Determining the suitability of various measures for Queensland;
- Using the research to raise community awareness about these issues;
- Actively engaging, and by doing this empowering, young Queensland drivers and riders, rural residents and others likely to be affected by the committee's work; and
- Working with the research participants to solve a complex social problem and act as an agent of social change.

By combining a participative research method with the results of evaluations of interventions used in other places, the committee was able to identify successfully the suitability of various measures for Queensland. This research also enabled the committee to identify possible problems with suggested interventions and then identify corresponding solutions.

The committee's research had the further benefit of raising the profile of young driver issues in the community. This occurred both directly through the committee's activities and indirectly through communication of these activities to others, for instance by the media.

The committee held a strong belief that it was important to engage actively with young people and others likely to be affected by the committee's work. It is difficult to gauge if the committee accomplished this aim. However, 64 per cent of those providing feedback forms at the forums were aged 24 years and under.

By working with research participants to solve a complex social problem, the committee was able to act as a social change agent. The government is required under the *Parliament of Queensland Act 2001* to provide feedback to Queensland parliamentary committees about whether recommendations are supported or rejected. Of the 33 recommendations, 19 were supported, 12 partially supported and two rejected (Queensland Transport 2004a; Queensland Transport 2004b). The Queensland Government rejected recommendations concerning the late night driving restriction and the passenger restriction. However, the government is in the process of organising a trial of L-plates to commence at the start of 2005 (Queensland Parliament, 2004b).

The committee's work resulted in a series of recommendations to the Parliament that will help reduce the number of young drivers and riders killed and injured in Queensland. By combining traditional positivistic research with participative research, the committee ensured a number of benefits from their research. These benefits include well-grounded recommendations that were relevant to Queensland, raising community awareness, empowering young people and others as well as working with research participants to solve complex social problems. Without the participative research, some of these benefits would have been lost.

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