

AUDITOR-GENERAL'S REPORT TO PARLIAMENT IMPROVING LEGAL AND SAFE DRIVING AMONG ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

New response needed to improve Aboriginal peoples' access to driver licences

Government responses to improve legal and safe driving among Aboriginal people have had limited success reducing Aboriginal peoples' over-representation in road accident fatalities, traffic-related offending and imprisonments.

Less than half the eligible Aboriginal people in New South Wales currently hold a driver licence compared to seven out of ten for non-Aboriginal people. Licensed drivers make for safer roads, with fewer accidents and injuries. Driver licences give people the mobility they need to access services and actively participate in their communities.

Barriers to access

There are real barriers for Aboriginal people to obtain, retain and regain driver licences. Barriers preventing Aboriginal people from obtaining a licence include:

- a critical shortage of supervising drivers to assist learner drivers complete the required 120 hours of supervised driving
- poorer literacy and numeracy skills among Aboriginal people which lower the pass rates for the driver knowledge test
- not having a birth certificate which is the main proof of identity to obtain a driver licence
- the layout, location and hours of operations of motor registries.

Aboriginal people find it harder to retain their licence primarily due to unpaid fines. The fine may or may not be related to driving, but if not paid can result in driver licence suspension.

Aboriginal people are losing their licence for fine default at around three times the rate of non-Aboriginal people and face real barriers to regaining it.

Aboriginal people found guilty of a 'driver licence' offence are also more likely to be imprisoned. In 2011, twelve per cent of Aboriginal people found guilty of a 'driver licence' offence were imprisoned, compared to five per cent for non-Aboriginal people.

Challenges facing Aboriginal people in regaining their driver licences include knowing the options available for paying fines and managing debt, the ability to attend court if required and understanding court processes.

Programs to improve access

The New South Wales Government offers a number of programs to address the barriers Aboriginal people face in obtaining and retaining a driver licence. These programs include literacy/numeracy support, debt management, road rules education and supervised driving assistance.

These programs have had limited success at reducing the over-representation of Aboriginal people charged with or imprisoned for traffic offences. Driving programs have generally been only available in limited areas and for a short time. They also suffer from constraints in insurance coverage and volunteer driver reimbursements, lack of program ownership, uncertain funding and poor evaluation.

Some local programs have been more successful over longer periods of time. Some of the factors contributing to the longevity of these programs include a vision towards employment, utilising connections into Aboriginal communities and involving Aboriginal people in program development and delivery.

The State Debt Recovery Office also provides assistance for eligible people to work off their fines and sends SMS reminders to people about unpaid fines. These initiatives have been slow to reduce the number of licence suspensions among Aboriginal people for overdue fines. Only 0.05 per cent of 2011-12 penalty notices were settled through a Work and Development Order.

Recommendations

The NSW Auditor-General, Grant Hehir, recommends the NSW Government support Aboriginal people to obtain a driver licence through:

- publicising that a Certificate of Aboriginality will be accepted as a primary proof of identity document if accompanied by a secondary proof of identity document
- assisting Aboriginal people to pass the driver knowledge test
- assisting Aboriginal people to complete supervised driving hours
- improving the access and quality of driver licensing programs.

The Auditor-General recommends that the NSW Government support Aboriginal people to retain or regain a driver licence through:

- expanding and promoting Work and Development Orders
- investigating innovative ways of communicating court attendance information.

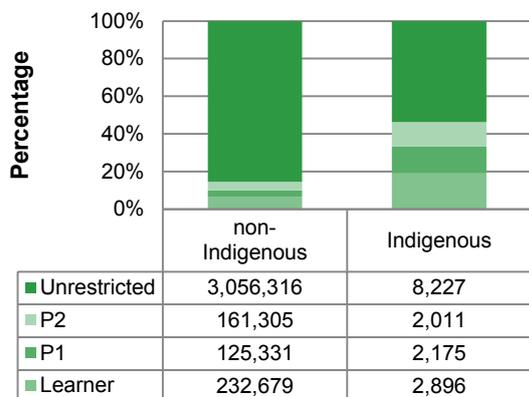
The Auditor-General further recommends that New South Wales develop a coherent and coordinated approach led by the key departments of Transport for NSW and the Department of Attorney General and Justice.

Further information

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Supporting data

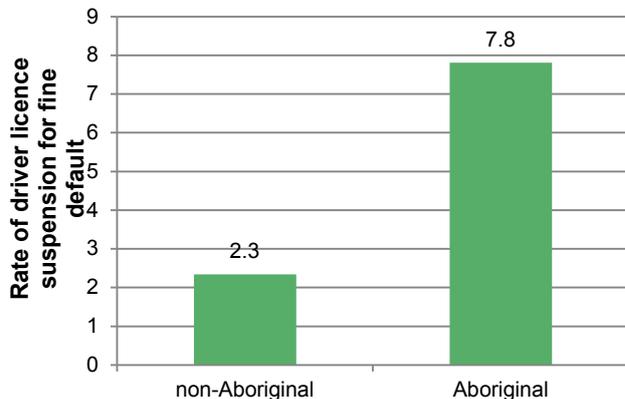
Exhibit 3: Licence holders by licence type and Indigenous status in 2011



Source: Audit Office analysis 2013, Transport for NSW data February 2013.

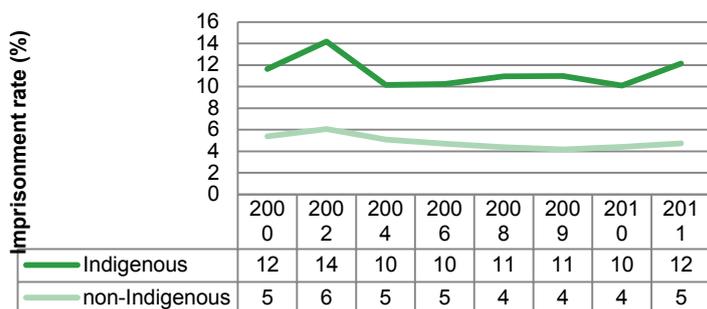
Note: Indigenous offenders include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders.

Exhibit 10: Rate of driver licence suspensions and cancellations for fine default in 2011 by Aboriginal status (%)



Source: Audit Office analysis 2013; Transport for NSW data February 2013.

Exhibit 21: Imprisonment rate for those found guilty of a 'driver licence' offence, 2000 to 2011 (%)



Source: Audit Office analysis 2013, Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research Court Statistics 2005 to 2011.

Note: Indigenous offenders include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander offenders.