

Exploring Attitudes of Young Adults toward Cars and Driver Licensing

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Abstract

In recent decades, young adults in Australia and much of the developed world have become less likely to get a driving licence. Research into this trend is only recently emerging yet it is likely to have important impacts on public transport and road planning. Very little is known about the attitudes of young adults toward cars and driving and how these attitudes impact whether they choose to acquire a driving licence. This paper presents the results of a survey of over 200 young adults in Melbourne, Australia. The survey explores the relationship between car licensing and demographics, life stage, use of social media and attitudes as well as exploring reasons why some young adults do not have a licence. Although most young adults see a car as providing independence, they also see it as a big responsibility; they are much less likely to believe a car means someone is 'doing well in life.' Non-drivers say they would rather spend money on other expenses and believe they can get where they want without driving. Policy implications of the results are discussed and future research directions are suggested.

1. Introduction

Generation Y recently surpassed the baby boomers to become Australia's largest generation (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012) and as this generation reaches adulthood its travel needs and habits will become increasingly important to understand. Currently travel in Australia is heavily dependent on the private vehicle; the number of cars and vehicle kilometres travelled continues to increase each year (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2010). Yet against this backdrop there is a remarkable emerging trend which is not well understood: young Australians are becoming less likely to get a driving licence and depend on the private car for travel (Raimond and Milthorpe 2010, Delbosc and Currie 2013a).

This downward trend in car licensing amongst the young has only recently been recognised (Delbosc and Currie 2013b). Researchers are beginning to explore a range of explanations such as household income, the cost of motoring, changing cultural attitudes, changing demographics, the role of electronic communications and graduated licensing (Noble 2005, Raimond and Milthorpe 2010, Davis et al. 2012, Delbosc and Currie 2012, Licaj et al. 2012, Delbosc and Currie 2013a). However few studies have explored how the attitudes of young adults influence their choices (Noble 2005, Delbosc and Currie 2012), how licensing fits into

the greater picture of young adult life and whether young adults are simply delaying or outright forgoing getting a licence (e.g. Stokes 2012).

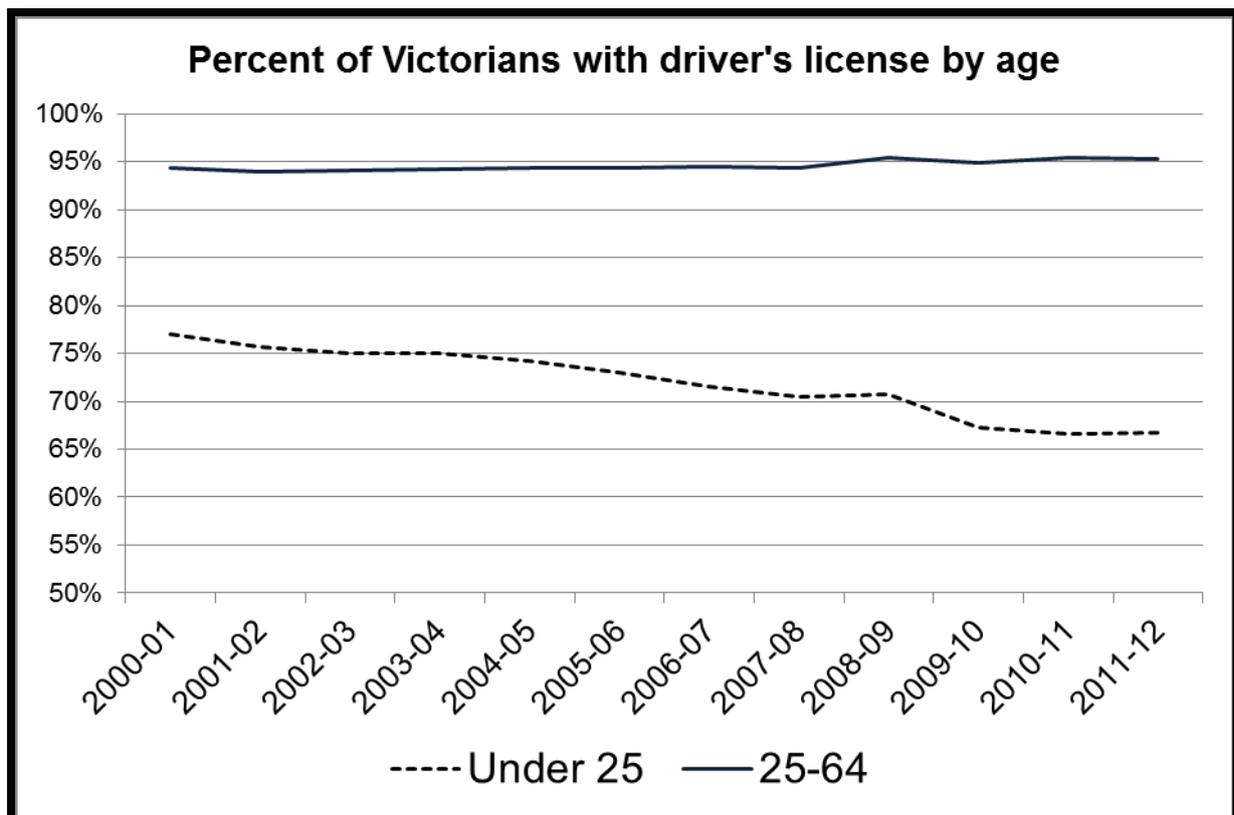
This paper expands the literature by presenting the results of a survey of over 200 young adults in Melbourne, Australia. It is the first study in Australia to quantitatively measure and compare the attitudes of young drivers versus non-drivers. It examines licensing in the broader context of young adults' lives and explores whether unlicensed young adults intend to get a licence in the near future.

The paper takes the following structure. The next section contains a review of past literature on young people and driving. It is followed by a description of the survey and analysis method. The results of the survey are then presented, focussing on the attitudes of drivers and non-drivers. This is followed by a discussion of the results, highlighting areas for future research.

2. Research Context

In Victoria, the per cent of under 25 year olds with a driver's licence dropped from 77% in 2000-01 to 67% in 2011-12 (see Figure 1); at the same time licensing for those over 25 remained steady (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, VicRoads 2012). Research in New South Wales dating back to 1991 shows a similar trend amongst young people (Raimond and Milthorpe 2010). Furthermore licensing rates are steadily decreasing amongst young people in many countries in Europe and North America (Sivak and Schoettle 2011, Sivak and Schoettle 2012).

Figure 1: Licenced drivers as per cent of age group, 2001-2011, Victoria



Source: Licensing data supplied by VicRoads (VicRoads 2012) and compared to population (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012).

Emerging research suggests that situational variables such as income, motoring costs, and graduated licensing are contributing to these trends (McDonald and Trowbridge 2009,

Raimond and Milthorpe 2010, Kuhnimhof et al. 2012, Delbosc and Currie 2013a). One recent study explored how household and lifestyle changes may be impacting youth licensing; young adults who have a full-time job and live independently with their own children are more likely to have a car licence, yet young adults are increasingly delaying this stage of life (Delbosc and Currie 2013a). These studies raise important questions about how licensing and driving fit into the greater picture of young adult life and future decisions.

In addition to these life stage variables, a number of researchers have begun to consider whether the attitudes of young people have contributed to this decline in car reliance. A survey of young non-drivers in the UK (Noble 2005) asked their reason for not driving and found that the cost of insurance and of learning to drive were the most important reasons (in the UK, insurance can account for nearly 60% of motoring costs for young men). Other reasons included other forms of transport were available, being too busy to learn and no interest in driving (Noble 2005).

A qualitative study in Australia raised the possibility that the car may no longer be seen as a clear status symbol, which may reduce its appeal for some young adults (Delbosc and Currie 2012). However the same study found that environmental concerns are unlikely to have a strong influence on licensing decisions and that electronic communications are unlikely to be replacing car travel (Delbosc and Currie 2012).

Finally, researchers are also beginning to question whether an increasing number of young adults are forgoing a licence entirely, or only delaying when they pursue a licence (Stokes 2012, Delbosc and Currie 2013b).

This study uses a survey of young adults in Melbourne, Australia to better understand the life stage decisions of young Australians, their licensing patterns and their attitudes toward cars and driving. It will also explore the reasons why some young adults do not have a learner's permit or driving licence and whether they intend to get a licence in the near future.

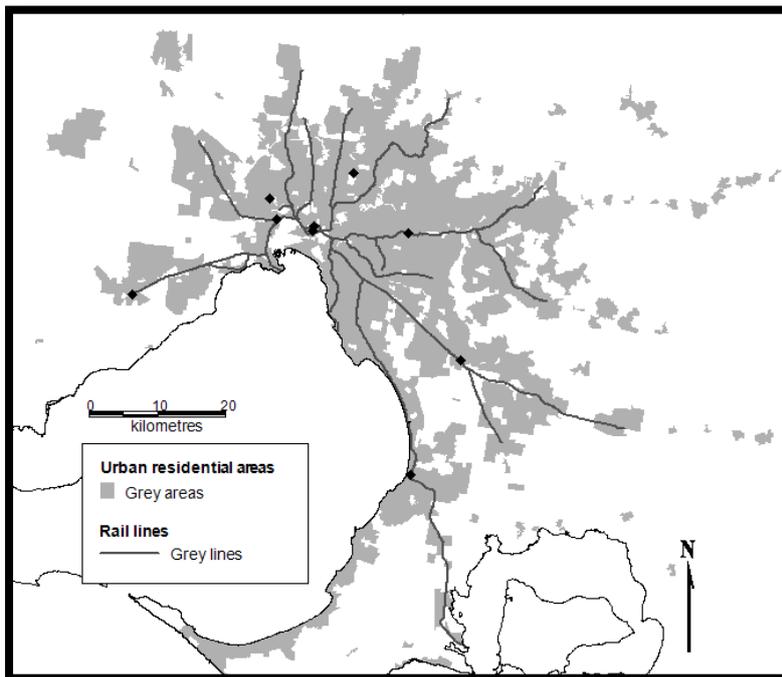
3. Research Method

A face-to-face survey of young adults was undertaken in Melbourne, Australia administered by the state government body Public Transport Victoria (PTV). Nine survey sample locations were chosen; two were inner-city shopping areas and seven were middle- and outer-suburban train stations and shopping areas (see Figure 2). A mix of shopping areas and train stations were selected to gain a broad sample of young adults with and without licenses. Some 46% of survey responses were recorded from the two inner-city areas and the remaining 54% were sampled from the other locations.

Young adults were approached and asked to complete a survey about transport and travel. If they were between the ages of 17 and 25 they were then guided through the questionnaire by the surveyor.

The survey asked a range of questions about transport and travel, including current mode use and licence-holding, attitudes to driving and public transport, reasons for not having licence (where applicable), future intent to get a licence or car, life stage and demographics.

Figure 2: Survey sample locations



Note: Diamonds represent survey sampling locations

Attitude questions were asked on a scale of 1 to 5 where 1 indicated 'strongly disagree' and 5 indicated 'strongly agree.' Those without a licence were asked to rate a series of possible reasons why on a scale of 1 ('very unimportant reason') to 5 ('very important reason'). Future intent was measured on a scale from 0 ('no chance this will happen in the next year') to 10 ('certain that this will happen in the next year').

4. Results

4.1 Survey participants

A total of 216 surveys were completed. Table 1 indicates some characteristics of survey respondents compared to the 2011 census of Melbourne (the census includes both residents and visitors). The age profile of the respondents was broadly similar to the census population with a slight over-representation of the 20-22 age group. Just over half of respondents lived with their parents, followed by 29% with roommates or friends (this could not be compared to the census because of differences in how households are measured). Only 5% of respondents were responsible for children, similar to the census population.

Around half of respondents were university students and a reasonable proportion of these were international students. Almost one-quarter of respondents worked full-time and, 16% worked part-time and 10% were in secondary school. This is somewhat difficult to compare to the census as the survey required people to choose one main employment whereas the census allows people to indicate both work and study. However it appears that the survey sample over-represents university students and slightly under-represents full-time workers.

Table 1: Characteristics of survey participants compared to census in Melbourne

		Full sample	Census 2011 Melbourne
What is your age?	17-19	28%	33%
	20-22	40%	34%
	23-25	33%	36%
Household ^a	Live alone	7%	n/a
	With parents	52%	n/a
	Spouse/partner	11%	n/a
	Roommates/friends	29%	n/a
	Other	2%	n/a
Responsible for children	Yes	5%	6%
	No	95%	94%
Employment status	Employed full time	24%	29%
	Employed part time	16%	26% ^b
	Secondary school	10%	11%
	University student	48%	37%
	<i>International student</i>	19%	n/a
	<i>Domestic student</i>	29%	n/a
	Unemployed	3%	7%
Household cars	No household cars	24%	9%
Home location	Inner Melbourne	20%	12%
	Middle Melbourne	51%	48%
	Outer Melbourne	29%	39%
Driver's licence	No licence or learner's permit	44%	38% ^c
	Licence	56%	62%

^aABS does not measure households using these categories, e.g., a household classified as 'couple with kids' does not distinguish whether the young person is the parent or the dependent.

^bCensus allows people to indicate both work and study; survey required people to choose one only.

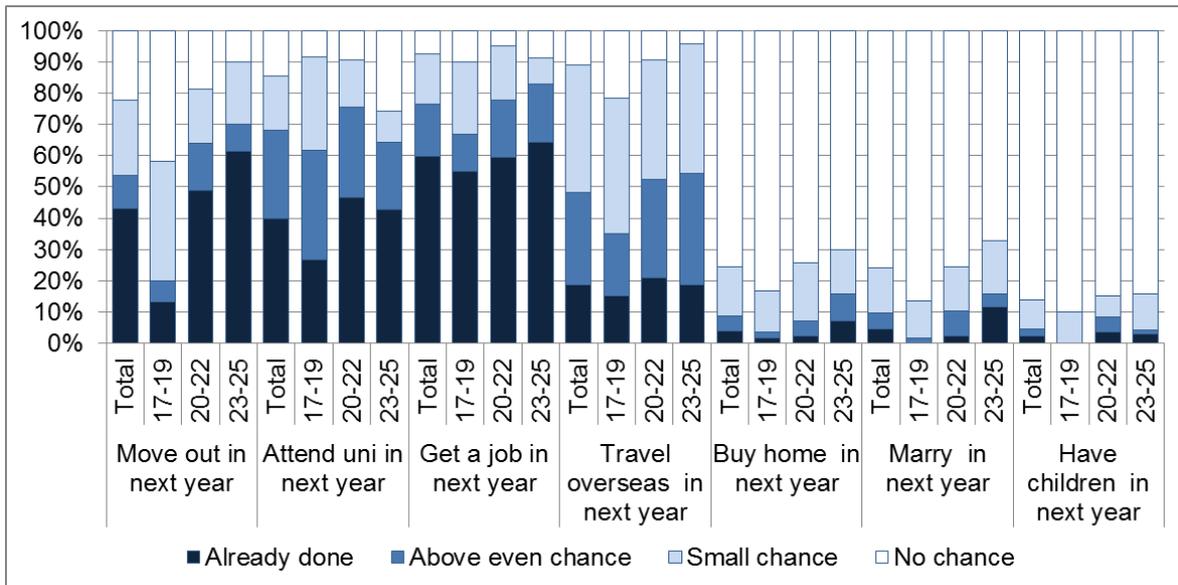
^cLicensing comparison sourced from VicRoads state-wide data (VicRoads 2012) compared to the population of Victoria (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012); Melbourne-only data not available

The largest difference between the survey sample and the census is that almost one-quarter of survey respondents lived in households without cars, compared to only 9% of census respondents. This was highly dependent on the household living situation; 52% of roommate households did not have a car compared to only 7% of parental households. Survey respondents were also more likely to live in inner Melbourne and less likely to live in outer Melbourne than the census average. They were also more likely to have no licence or a learner's permit, however this had to be compared to the state-wide average as no current estimate of licence-holding in Melbourne is available.

4.1.1 Life stage of participants

In addition to measuring present demographics, the survey also asked participants to share their short-term life plans such as intent to move out of home, work, travel and marry. Figure 3 presents these life stages overall and divided by respondent age. Intent to leave the parental home increases sharply between 17-19 and 20-22. Over 85% of the survey sample intended to go to university or were already enrolled and most young adults who did not already have a job intended to get one soon. Around 20% of young adults had already travelled overseas and almost all of the remaining respondents thought there was at least a small chance they would travel in the next year.

Figure 3: Present and future life stage of participants



Note: Intent was measured as a rating of likelihood that they would undertake this activity in the next 12 months on a scale from 0 (no chance) to 10 (certainty). Ratings of 1-4 were classified as 'small' and 5-10 as 'above even'

There is a very strong contrast between these experiences and the life stage of buying a home, getting married and having children. The 23-25 age group were the most likely to see themselves entering these life stages in the next year, yet 70% did not think there was any chance they would buy a home, 67% thought there was no chance they would marry and 84% thought there was no chance they would have children in the next year.

These results show that most survey participants were focussed on moving out, working, studying and travelling but there was very little interest in some of the more traditionally 'adult' life stage transitions such as buying a house or starting a family.

4.2 Licence-holding and life stage of young adults

Table 2 illustrates the licence-holding of the survey sample in greater depth. The sample was fairly evenly divided between no licence and learner's permit (L-plate) with over half (57%) holding a provisional or full licence. This varied greatly by age; only 28% of 17-19 year-olds could drive independently compared to 71% of 23-25 year-olds.

Licensing also varied by demographic characteristics. Young adults living alone or with roommates/friends were the least likely to have a licence; young adults living with a partner were the most likely. The sample size of respondents with children was very small (10) so no conclusions can be made about its impact on licensing. However employment status had a large impact on licensing; the highest licensing rate was among those employed full-time, followed by part-time workers, domestic university students and the unemployed. Secondary students and international university students had the lowest licensing rates.

Table 2: Licence-holding of survey sample (percentages across rows)

		No license	Learner's permit	Provisional or full license
Overall		24%	20%	57%
What is your age?	17-19	33%	38%	28%
	20-22	21%	15%	64%
	23-25	19%	10%	71%
Household	Live alone	36%	21%	43%
	With parents	20%	20%	61%
	Spouse/partner	0%	13%	88%
	Roommates/friends	36%	23%	42%
	Other	50%	25%	25%
Responsible for children	Yes	10%	30%	60%
	No	24%	19%	56%
Employment status	Employed full time	8%	10%	82%
	Employed part time	15%	24%	62%
	Secondary school	33%	52%	14%
	University student	32%	17%	51%
	<i>International student</i>	60%	10%	30%
	<i>Domestic student</i>	14%	22%	64%
Household cars	Unemployed	33%	17%	50%
	No household cars	42%	23%	35%
Home location	One+ household cars	18%	19%	63%
	Inner Melbourne	21%	19%	61%
Home location	Middle Melbourne	32%	19%	49%
	Outer Melbourne	11%	21%	68%

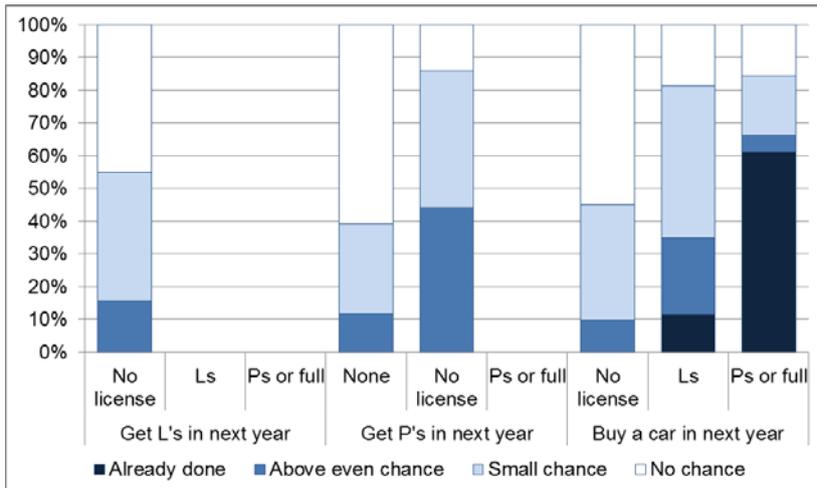
Living in a household without a car was strongly associated with not having a licence. The impact of home location was not necessarily as expected. The highest proportion of licence-holders were in outer Melbourne, closely followed by inner Melbourne, and the largest proportion of young adults with no licence or permit lived in middle Melbourne. This is likely a combination of land-use impacts and the age distribution of young adults; young adults in inner Melbourne tended to be older which provides them with more time to get a licence if they want one.

4.2.1 Future intent to get a driving licence

Participants were asked to rate the likelihood that they would get a learner's permit, get a provisional licence or buy a car in the next year. Figure 4 presents these results divided by current licence holding.

Only 16% of respondents without a licence thought there was an above-even chance they would get a learner's permit in the next year, suggesting that driving is not on the short-term horizon for most of these young adults. In contrast, among young adults who already have a learner's permit, 86% thought there was at least a small chance they would get a provisional licence in the next year and 81% thought they might get a car or already had one. Some 60% of young adults with a provisional or full licence already had a car although 16% did not anticipate getting one in the next year.

Figure 4: Intent to get a licence or car in the next year by current licence holding.



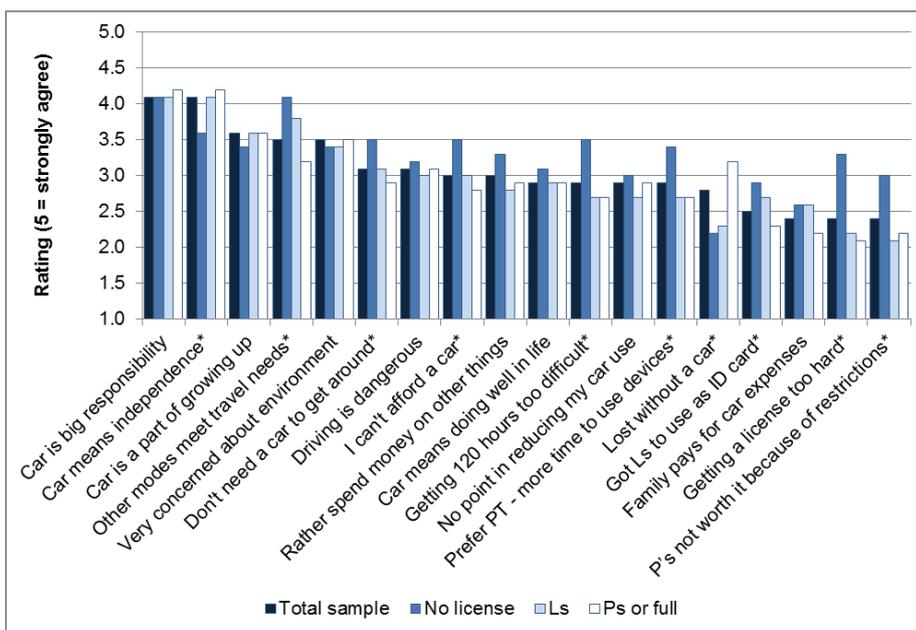
Note: Intent was measured as a rating of likelihood that they would undertake this activity in the next 12 months on a scale from 0 (no chance) to 10 (certainty). Ratings of 1-4 were classified as 'small' and 5-10 as 'above even'

These findings suggest that many young adults without a licence do not intend to get one, whereas once a young adult begins the licensing process (through a learner's permit) they generally intend to continue the process and purchase a car.

4.3 Attitudes toward driving and public transport

All participants were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a range of attitude statements about cars and public transport. The responses are presented in Figure 5, sorted from highest to lowest average agreement and sub-divided by licence-holding. The two statements with the highest agreement are that a car is a big responsibility and that it provides independence. A car was also believed to be a part of growing up, yet there was much less agreement that a car meant you were doing well in life. There was much stronger agreement with other modes meeting travel needs than with the statement 'I would be lost without a car.'

Figure 5: Attitudes toward driving and public transport by licence type



Note: *indicates ratings that statistically significantly differ between licensing types

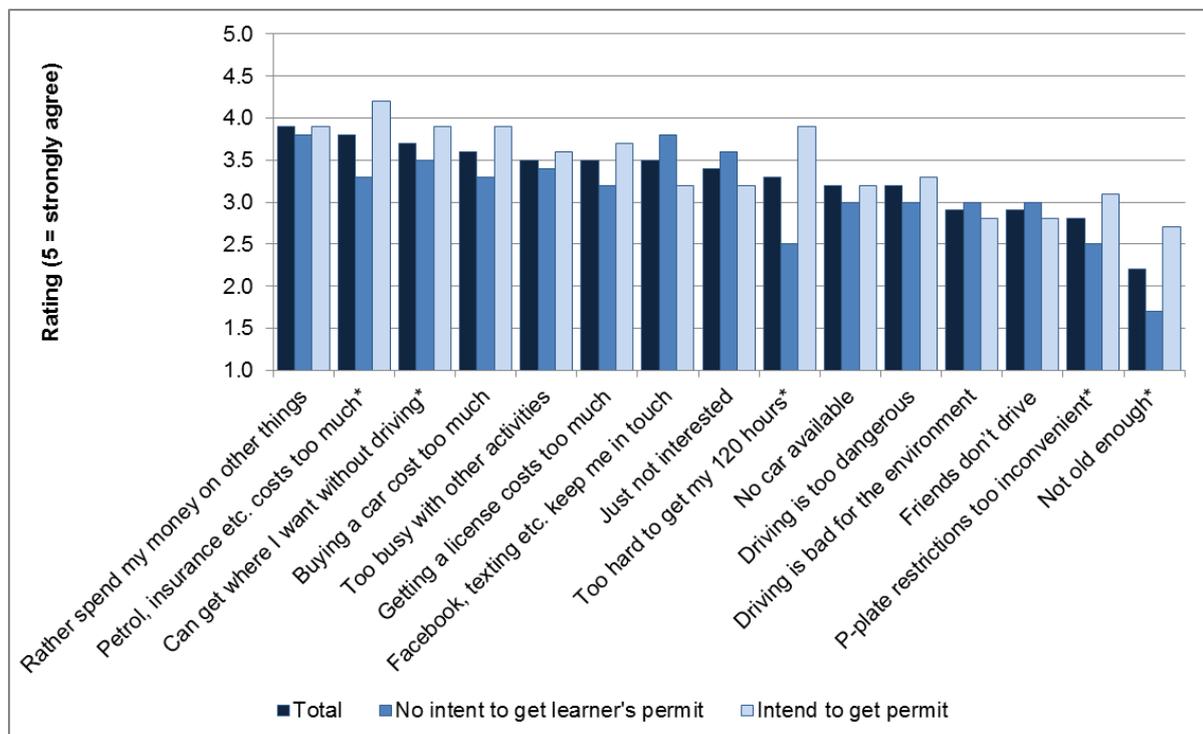
Comparing the results across licence-holding reveals some telling patterns (ratings that statistically significantly vary between licensing categories are highlighted with *). Respondents without a licence or learner's permit are significantly less likely to believe that a car means independence, they show less dependence on cars and believe other modes meet their needs, they're more likely to believe licensing restrictions are too difficult and they are more likely to prefer public transport because it gives them more time to use devices like a smartphone or tablet.

Other statements did not vary based on licensing, such as environmental concerns, the belief that driving is dangerous and that having a car means you're doing well in life. This suggests that these issues are not strongly influencing licensing decisions, or that they are being overridden by other factors.

Respondents who did not yet have a licence or learner's permit were asked an additional set of questions to better understand why they did not have a permit (note that the sample size for this question was only 51 respondents). Figure 6 presents these results ranked by importance (higher values indicate a more important reason). The most common responses had to do with the cost of motoring and wanting to spend their money on other things. However, being able to get where they want without driving, being too busy and using social media to keep in touch with friends were also common reasons. In contrast, difficulties with getting 120 supervised driving hours, the danger of driving, environmental issues and P-plate restrictions were less important.

These reasons were also compared between those people who intended to get a learner's permit in the next year and those who did not (see Figure 5). For those who did not intend to get a learner's permit, the most important reasons were: wanting to spend money on other things, using social media to keep in touch with friends and not being interested in driving. For those who did intend to get a learner's permit, the costs of motoring, being able to get around without a car and getting 120 supervised hours were the most important barriers.

Figure 6: Reasons why respondents had no permit by intent to get a permit in next year



Note: *indicates ratings that statistically significantly differ between licensing intent

These results suggest that cost and alternatives to car travel are some of the most important reasons why young people delay or forgo getting a learner's permit. Although the sample size is small, there is some preliminary evidence that these reasons differ between people who are simply delaying getting a licence and those who are likely to forgo one entirely.

5. Discussion and implications

This paper provides an understanding of the life stage of 17-25 year-olds in Melbourne and their attitudes toward driver licensing. It found that most survey respondents were focussed on moving out of the parental home, attending university, working and travelling; in contrast very few anticipated that they would buy a home, marry or have children in the near future. Most respondents had a driving licence or learner's permit, but 24% had neither. Having a licence was associated with being older, being in full-time work, living with roommates or a partner and living in a household with a car. These findings support a recent analysis that analysed Victorian travel survey data (Delbosc and Currie 2013a). Importantly, long-term trends suggest that young adults are becoming increasingly less likely to live independently, work full-time or marry, all of which are associated with having a driver's licence (Delbosc and Currie 2013a, Delbosc and Currie 2013b).

Although getting a licence is not synonymous with getting and using a car, this survey suggests that once someone gets a learner's permit they generally intend to continue to a licence and car purchase. In contrast, almost half of those without a licence did not think they would get one in the next year. These findings are similar to a survey in Britain that found less than 40% of 16-29 year olds without a licence intended to get one in the next year (Stokes 2012).

In general, young adults believed having a car was a big responsibility and a part of growing up. However significantly, young adults were less likely to believe that having a car meant someone was doing well in life. This supports previous research that suggests that owning a car may no longer be seen as the status symbol it was for previous generations (Delbosc and Currie 2012).

Young adults without a licence were more likely to believe that cars were not necessary to getting around, were concerned about the costs of driving and believed getting a licence was very difficult. Young adults who hoped to get a licence in the near future were more likely to cite costs and licensing restrictions as barriers. In contrast, those young adults with no intent to get a licence were more likely to be uninterested in driving and believe that social media keeps them in touch with their friends.

These findings suggest that costs and licensing restrictions present significant, though possibly short-term, toward youth licensing. In contrast, providing viable alternatives to private transport may delay the need for young adults to seek a driving licence.

The results also provide further insight into how social media and electronic communication may be playing a role in the trend toward reduced youth licensing. Although it was not the most significant influence, a proportion of non-drivers said they preferred public transport because it allowed them to use smartphones and other devices. Furthermore many non-drivers said that texting and social media reduced their need for a driving licence.

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