



Driver Improvement Programs and Interventions: CARP 2012 Request for Information Submission to the Ontario Ministry of Government Services

Age-based attitudes and practices

The population of older drivers in Canada is increasing with the aging population. There were over 3 million people over 65 with driver's licences in 2009. Two hundred thousand of these older drivers were aged 85 and over.ⁱ Approximately 75% of older Canadians drive, according to Statistics Canada.ⁱⁱ This is not a surprise as Canadians are living longer and more active lives, and driving is integral to their independence, mobility, social inclusion, and overall quality of life.

Older drivers, however, are often falsely perceived as poor drivers, posing traffic safety problems. The prevailing attitude toward older drivers is that they should be removed from the road, often regardless of ability to drive.ⁱⁱⁱ Counter to evidence, expert groups and many governments operate on this false and implicitly ageist assumptions that the ability to drive safely decreases with age due to later life medical conditions that can affect the ability to drive.^{iv} Current government licensing practices are similarly ageist in design, failing to respect the dignity and needs of individual older adults while overlooking evidence that proves older drivers are safe.

Evidence shows older drivers are safe

Evidence disproves the assumption that older drivers are less safe than the general population. Several studies have shown that older drivers are actually as safe as or safer than the general population:

- 65 plus drivers are as safe as the general population of drivers, on a kilometre to kilometre basis. Older drivers tend to drive shorter distances, on roadways with lower speed limits, and they drive fewer total kilometres, thereby drastically reducing the opportunity for risk.^v
- Older drivers have more driving experience than younger drivers; hence, most older drivers are safer than younger drivers^{vi}
- Older drivers are pre-cautionary and tend to self-regulate their driving in response to changes in driving skills and needs.^{vii}
- Statistics overstate the rate of accidents among older drivers:
 - Older adults tend to report their crashes more fully and readily than other drivers
 - Accidents involving injuries are reported more than those without. Since older drivers are more likely to suffer more serious injuries and fatalities than younger drivers due to increased physical frailty, their crashes are more likely to be reported. But, such data only proves increased frailty of older drivers and not driving ability.^{viii}
- Drivers over 70 are no more likely to cause crashes than any other driver, and are considerably safer than younger drivers, according to a UK report^{ix}

Driving is important to the well-being of older adults

An evidence based approach to driving is crucial, as false assumptions and age-based regulations and training and licensing procedures negatively affect seniors. For many older adults, driving is important to their identity and quality of life. It is a means of mobility, dignity, self-reliance, and social inclusion, particularly for people who live rurally.^x When they have to reduce or cease driving, which in many cases it is the major or only means of transportation,

they experience monetary, social, psychological, and emotional costs.^{xi} This can mean limited access to basic necessities, such as grocery shopping and health care.^{xii} Unnecessary limitations and interventions on driving ability have also been linked to an increase in depressive symptoms.^{xiii} Without the option of driving, able seniors are forced into dependence on others, which can be a challenge for those who do not have nearby family or friends.

Ability not Age – Reforming improvement and intervention

Due to the evidence that disproves age-based assumptions and the importance of driving to a large proportion of Canada's population, the government must take an ability-based, rather than age-based, approach as it reforms its driver improvement programs and interventions. The government's goal should be to achieve a safe driving environment where governing rules are fair and consider the changing needs of people.

CARP members have expressed their fear of current regulations unfairly taking their licence away on the basis of age rather than ability. To eliminate such fears and unfairness, improvement program and intervention regulations that are age-based and may result undue hardship, cost, or punitive measures should be eliminated. Instead, the rules should encourage the safety of all drivers regardless of their age and provide means for people to improve their driving skills as they undergo various life and health changes, such as the onset of certain medical conditions that may alter driving habits without interfering in the ability to drive. Training and education programs can teach drivers of all ages how to prioritize safety without fear of licence removal.

Recommendations for safe driving for everyone

The system should ensure that all people are safe drivers. Driver programs and interventions should eliminate age-based discrimination for older drivers and pro-actively increase safety measures for all drivers. The following recommendations and examples can help shape new regulations for training, licensing, and intervention programs:

- 1) Assess safety regardless of age
 - Rather than assessing people when a certain age is reached, assessment should be done for all drivers as warranted, to ensure everyone's safety.
 - Although older adults can become frailer with age, physical and cognitive impairments and changes are not exclusive to older adults and assessment will help identify everyone at risk.
- 2) Assess the ability to drive
 - Assessment should solely test people's driving skills rather than other unrelated skills, such as people's ability to navigate computer-based programs and other technological interfaces.
 - This means offering practical tests that take into account the particular challenges associated with certain conditions and ailments, such as diabetes and mobility limitations, regardless of age.
- 3) Encourage on-going training with adaptive supports, protocols and incentives
 - Everyone should be encouraged to improve their driving. Incentives can include insurance discounts, as is the case in a number of US states.^{xiv}
 - Government should create incentives for safety training, such as diversion programs available in the US^{xv} and UK^{xvi} where people have the option of

- taking driver improvement courses in lieu of points or other penalties for non-criminal traffic violations or other prosecution
- Government can establish safety protocols to address known conditions such as now exist for conditions like diabetes
 - Such approach improves people’s driving capacity rather than merely punishing people’s offences
 - Saves the system high costs associated with prosecution procedures
 - Courses can be provided publicly or through private providers which have been pre-qualified.

Current regulations regarding older drivers are age-based, counter to evidence and principles of fairness and safety. Older drivers fear current regulations that can unfairly take away their licences – and with it their independence and well-being - on the basis of age rather than ability. To eliminate such fears and unfairness, improvement programs and intervention regulations should aim to root out unsafe drivers of all ages, while promoting proactive training and assessment programs that encourage learning and honest assessment of skills, regardless of age.

For many older adults, driving is important to their quality of life. It is a means of mobility, dignity, self-reliance, and social inclusion, particularly for people who live rurally.^{xvii} The government should ensure the safety of all drivers through ability based regulations rather than through age-based interventions.

References

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