

The Reasons for the Recent Decline in Young Driver Licensing in the United States

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Objective: This survey examined why a substantial percentage of young adults currently do not have a driver's license and the future plans of this group concerning obtaining a license.

Method: A questionnaire was developed to examine several issues related to an individual's decision not to obtain a driver's license. An online survey was conducted, yielding useable responses from 618 persons aged 18 to 39 without a driver's license.

Results: The top 8 reasons for not having a driver's license were as follows: (1) too busy or not enough time to get a driver's license (determined by personal priorities), (2) owning and maintaining a vehicle is too expensive, (3) able to get transportation from others, (4) prefer to bike or walk, (5) prefer to use public transportation, (6) concerned about how driving impacts the environment, (7) able to communicate and/or conduct business online instead, and (8) disability/medical/vision problems. Of the respondents, 22% indicated that they plan to never obtain a driver's license. On the other hand, 69% expect to get a driver's license within the next 5 years. Young adults without a driver's license—in comparison with the general population of the same age—tend to have less education and higher unemployment. However, the present study was not designed to investigate whether there is a causal relationship or the direction of the effect if there were such a relationship.

Keywords: driver's licenses, driver age, economic factors, Internet usage

Introduction

In a recent series of papers, we have documented the decreasing frequency of obtaining a driver's license for younger members of the population (i.e., under 40 years of age), both in the United States and in other countries (Sivak and Schoettle 2011, 2012a, 2012b). However, limited information exists regarding the underlying causes of this decline.

An analysis of licensing trends in 15 countries (Sivak and Schoettle 2012a) found a significant relationship between Internet users per capita and reduced rates of licensing for younger adults. Other studies have attempted to further describe the source of this decline but with limited success (Davis and Dutzik 2012; Delbosc and Currie 2013; Taylor et al. 2013; Williams 2011). These studies examined the attitudes of young adults and the potential influence of recent societal changes, including graduated licensing, changes in transportation and communication technologies, changes in the social status attached to driving and car ownership, and the so-called boomerang effect with young adults returning to live with their parents. But the methods of these studies were often not specifically focused on why individuals chose to delay get-

ting (or not to get) a license. (One part of the study by Williams [2011] did attempt to specifically analyze the reasons for delay in licensing but only for a sample of 15- to 18-year-olds.) As such, previous studies were not conclusive on the question of delayed licensing for young adults as a whole.

Therefore, the current study was designed to specifically assess the reasons younger adults chose to delay (or forego) obtaining a driver's license. A survey was administered to young adults, 18 to 39 years old, who do not currently possess a valid driver's license, directly asking these individuals to describe the underlying reasons for not having a license and whether they plan to get a license in the future.

Method

Survey Instrument

An online survey was conducted using SurveyMonkey (www.surveymonkey.com), a web-based survey company. A questionnaire was developed to examine several issues related to an individual's decision not to obtain a driver's license. The main issues addressed were as follows:

- Primary reason for not obtaining a driver's license
- Secondary reason(s) for not obtaining a driver's license
- Future plans for obtaining a license

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Table 1. Age and gender breakdowns for the final 618 respondents

Demographic		N	%	
Age group	18–19	18	99	16.0
		19	99	16.0
	20–29	20–24	115	18.6
		25–29	99	16.0
	30–39	30–34	108	17.5
	35–39	98	15.9	
Gender ^a	Female	386	62.8	
	Male	229	37.2	

^aThere were 3 cases with unspecified gender.

Information related to daily online activity, the availability of other licensed drivers in the household, and additional demographic information was also collected for inclusion in the analysis.

Respondents

SurveyMonkey's Audience tool was used to target and recruit individuals in the United States between the ages of 18 and 39 from SurveyMonkey's respondent database. (These respondents are generally representative of the U.S. population [SurveyMonkey 2013]; however, online surveys, by their nature, result in the exclusion of individuals without Internet access.) The recruitment resulted in 4572 replies from potential respondents. Two selection criteria were then applied:

1. Only individuals who reported not currently having a valid driver's license were included.
2. Respondent age was then verified and required to be between 18 and 39. Additionally, a target quota of approximately 100 responses per age group was set, leading to the exclusion of otherwise qualified individuals as some age group quotas were filled.

Usable surveys were received for 618 respondents. Although 717 were initially qualified to complete the survey, 99 individuals did not finish after starting the survey. The final response rate (i.e., completed divided by eligible, or 618/717) was 86%. The percentage of individuals not qualified to complete the survey (3855 out of 4572 reported that they do have a valid license) was 84.3%. This value is consistent with the percentage of individuals 18 to 39 with a driver's license in the current U.S. population—84.7% (Sivak and Schoettle 2012b). Age and gender breakdowns for the respondents are presented in Table 1.

Results

Combined Summary of All Reasons for Not Obtaining a Driver's License

The results regarding the primary and secondary reasons for not obtaining a license were similar. Therefore, the responses to these two questions were combined for the presentation of the results. Table 2 presents summaries of all responses combined, by age and by gender. The percentages add to more than 100 because both primary and secondary reasons are

Table 2. Percentage of responses, by age group and by gender, for all reasons given^a

Reason	Age group			Gender		Total
	18–19	20–29	30–39	Female	Male	
Too busy or not enough time to get a driver's license	56.6	33.6	21.4	37.6	35.8	36.9
Owning and maintaining a vehicle is too expensive	30.3	31.8	34.0	32.1	31.9	32.0
Able to get transportation from others	40.4	24.8	28.2	34.2	25.3	30.9
Prefer to bike or walk	24.2	19.6	21.8	23.1	20.1	21.8
Prefer to use public transportation	9.6	20.1	20.9	15.5	19.7	17.0
Concerned about how driving impacts the environment	5.6	7.9	12.1	7.0	11.4	8.6
Able to communicate and/or conduct business online instead	6.1	5.6	11.2	5.2	11.8	7.6
Disability/medical/vision problem	1.0	7.9	12.6	6.7	8.3	7.3
Other reason	7.1	10.7	3.4	7.5	6.1	7.1
Never learned or still learning to drive	7.6	7.9	3.4	8.5	2.2	6.3
Do not like to drive/afraid to drive	3.0	4.7	3.9	5.7	0.9	3.9
Legal issue	0.5	0.5	4.9	2.6	0.9	1.9

^aThe most frequent response is shown in bold; as a summary of multiple possible responses, percentages sum to more than 100.

included and because more than one secondary response was allowed.

The most common response was "too busy or not enough time to get a driver's license" (36.9% overall). The second most common response related to the cost of owning and maintaining a vehicle (32.0%), followed by the ability to get transportation from others (30.9%).

Though "too busy or not enough time to get a driver's license" was the most common overall response, it was inversely related to age, with decreasing frequency as age increased (from 56.6% for the youngest group to 21.4% for the oldest group). Moreover, the most common response for the oldest age group was that owning and maintaining a vehicle was too expensive (34.0%). The youngest age group was more likely than the middle or older groups to say that they were able to get transportation from others (40.4 vs. 24.8 and 28.2%). Conversely, the youngest group was less likely to prefer the use of public transportation (9.6 vs. 20.1 and 20.9%). Concern about the environment, ability to communicate or conduct business online, medical problem or disability, and legal issues all increased in frequency as respondent age increased. The frequency of respondents who had not yet learned to drive decreased as age increased.

Female respondents were more likely than males to indicate that they were able to get transportation from others (34.2 vs. 25.3%). Females were also more likely than males to report that they have not yet learned to drive (8.5 vs. 2.2%), have a fear of driving (5.7 vs. 0.9%), or have some legal issue preventing them from obtaining a license (2.6 vs. 0.9%). Male respondents were more likely to report being able to communicate or conduct business online (11.8 vs. 5.2%).

Table 3. Percentage of responses, by age group and by gender, for the question: “When do you plan to get a driver’s license?”^a

Reason	Age group			Gender		Total
	18–19	20–29	30–39	Female	Male	
Never	7.1	21.5	35.4	18.7	26.6	21.5
In less than 1 year	64.1	46.7	18.4	47.7	34.5	42.9
In 1 to 5 years	26.3	23.8	29.1	28.5	22.7	26.4
In 6 to 10 years	1.5	2.8	11.7	2.6	10.0	5.3
In more than 10 years	1.0	5.1	5.3	2.6	6.1	3.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

^aThe most frequent response is shown in bold.

Future Plans for Obtaining a License

Respondents were asked: “When do you plan to get a driver’s license?” Overall, 21.5% said that they plan to never obtain a driver’s license (see Table 3). For those who said that they will never get a driver’s license, the oldest age group was the most likely to give this response (35.4%), with decreasing frequency as age decreased (21.5 and 7.1%, respectively). Males were also more likely to say “never” than females (26.6 vs. 18.7%).

The majority of respondents said that they do have future plans to obtain a license (78.5%). For those who do plan to get a license, the youngest age group was the most likely to say that they will get one in the next 5 years (90.4%), with decreasing frequency as age increased (70.5 and 47.5%, respectively); females were more likely than males to respond in this range (76.2 vs. 57.2%). For more long-term plans, the oldest group was the most likely to say 6 or more years (17.0%), with decreasing frequency as age decreased (7.9 and 2.5%, respectively). It was more common for males to say that they planned to get a license in 6 or more years (16.1%) than it was for females (5.2%).

Additional Demographic Results

Table 4 presents summaries of additional demographic information for the respondents. The most common attributes for the young adults without a driver’s license in this survey are as follows:

- Most have never had a valid driver’s license (84.5%).
- Most spouses or partners do have a valid driver’s license (65.9%).
 - However, approximately half of respondents (46.4%) currently have no spouse or partner.
- High school graduate was the most frequent education level completed (36.6%).
- Nearly half are currently unemployed (45.8%).
- When including full-time students, 66.4% are currently unemployed.
- Most respondents spend from 1 to 4 h per day online (49.0%).

Discussion

Why Do Some Young Adults Decide Not to Obtain a Driver’s License?

Our survey examined both the primary and secondary reasons for not having a driver’s license among young adults

Table 4. Summaries of additional demographic information^a

Question	Response	Percentage
Have you ever had a valid driver’s license?	Yes	15.5
	No	84.5
Does your spouse, partner, or significant other currently have a valid driver’s license? (the applicable percentage is shown in parentheses)	Yes	35.3 (65.9)
	No	18.3 (34.1)
	Not applicable	46.4 (—)
What is the highest level of education you have completed?	Some high school	14.9
	High school graduate	36.6
	Some college	26.5
	Associate degree	6.0
	Bachelor’s degree	8.4
	Graduate degree	7.6
What is your current level of employment?	Full-time employment	18.8
	Part-time employment	14.9
	Full-time student (and not employed)	20.6
	Not currently employed (including retired)	45.8
How many hours per day do you spend online communicating with friends and family or conducting business?	0 hours	8.1
	1 to 4 hours	49.0
	5 to 8 hours	22.3
	9 to 12 hours	12.5
	13 to 16 hours	2.9
	17 or more hours	5.2

^aThe most frequent response is shown in bold.

18 through 39 years of age. Because the patterns of the 2 sets of responses were similar, we will combine all reasons given in the discussion below. The top 8 reasons were as follows:

1. Too busy or not enough time to get a driver’s license (36.9%).
2. Owning and maintaining a vehicle is too expensive (32.0%).
3. Able to get transportation from others (30.9%).
4. Prefer to bike or walk (21.8%).
5. Prefer to use public transportation (17.0%).
6. Concerned about how driving impacts the environment (8.6%).
7. Able to communicate and/or conduct business online instead (7.6%).
8. Disability/medical/vision problems (7.3%).

Being too busy to obtain a license (#1 reason) is generally determined by personal priorities. The frequency of this response decreased as age increased (56.6, 33.6, and 21.4%, respectively).

The #2 and #3 reasons for not obtaining a license (*owning and maintaining a vehicle is too expensive* and *able to get transportation from others*) are generally supported by the underlying demographics of the respondents. Specifically, when compared with the general population 18 to 39 years old, respondents in this survey had much higher levels of unemployment (45.8%; 66.4% when including full-time/nonworking students), and a smaller proportion (22.0%) had completed an associate degree or higher. For comparison, unemployment for the same age group in the U.S. population is 10.5% (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2013), and 37.4% have completed an associate degree or higher (U.S. Census Bureau 2013a). The ability to get transportation from others is likely aided by the

fact that the majority (65.9%) of spouses or partners have a valid driver's license. (Though not measured in this study, it is likely that most parents of younger adults living at home also possess valid driver's licenses.)

The #4 and #5 reasons were *prefer to bike or walk* and *prefer to use public transportation*. The importance of these reasons likely reflects the increased urbanization of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau 2013b) and is indirectly influenced by the #6 reason (*concerned about how driving impacts the environment*). Overall, 8.6% of the respondents selected concern about the environment as a reason, with the 30- to 39-year-olds selecting this reason more frequently than the two younger groups (12.1 vs. 5.2 and 5.3%). The youngest age group was more likely to be able to get transportation from others than the other 2 age groups (40.4 vs. 24.8 and 28.2%), as were females in comparison with males (34.2 vs. 25.3%).

The #7 reason—*able to communicate and/or conduct business online instead*—was selected by 7.6% of all respondents but by 11.2% of those between 30 and 39 years of age. Male respondents were more likely to report being able to communicate or conduct business online (11.8 vs. 5.2%).

In a regression performed on data from 15 countries (Sivak and Schoettle 2012a), we found that the number of Internet users per capita was inversely related to the frequency of obtaining driver's licenses among young persons. The results from the current study suggest only a modest association between these 2 factors, given that only 7.6% of respondents selected *able to communicate and/or conduct business online instead* as a primary or secondary reason. Furthermore, it could be that high Internet usage may be a *consequence* of not having a driver's license and being unable to readily drive whenever needed. (Daily Internet usage was relatively moderate for the respondents in this study, with 49.0% reporting 1–4 h per day of online activity. At the 2 extremes, 20.6% of respondents reported 9 or more hours of use and 8.1% reported no use at all).

The #8 reason—*disability/medical/vision problems*—was selected by 7.3% of all respondents but by 12.6% of those between 30 and 39 years of age.

What Are the Long-Term Plans of Young Adults Without a Driver's License?

Our results suggest that 21.5% of persons 18 through 39 years of age who currently do not have a driver's license plan to never get one. The corresponding percentages for those aged 18 to 19, 20 to 29, and 30 to 39 are 7.1, 21.5, and 35.4%, respectively. Male respondents were more likely to plan to never obtain a license than females (26.6 vs. 18.7%).

On the other hand, 69.3% of persons between 18 and 39 years of age who currently do not have a driver's license plan to get a license within the next 5 years. The corresponding percentages for those aged 18 to 19, 20 to 29, and 30 to 39 are 90.4, 70.5, and 47.5%, respectively. Females were more likely than males to plan to obtain a license within the next 5 years (76.2 vs. 57.2%).

Driver's License, Education, and Employment

This study found that young adults without a driver's license—in comparison with the general population of the same age—tend to have less education and higher unemployment. However, the present study was not designed to investigate whether there is a causal relationship between having a driver's license on one hand and education and employment on the other hand, or the direction of the effect if there were such a relationship. Focus on these issues in future studies promises to be fruitful.

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