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Mobility and safety of young drivers in Finland – using data analysis to promote safety

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A reform of the Finnish driving licence legislation came into force in 2018 with major changes to driver instruction and examinations. The focus was on higher-order skills, the candidates' behaviour in traffic and their understanding of the risks and hazards in traffic, risks arising from other road users and especially from their own thoughts and actions as well as on ways to avoid risks and resolve them through one's own behaviour. In category B, obligatory training hours were reduced by a half, and the former three-phase system was replaced by a one-phase system. The content of training was reformed, and the duration of the driving test was extended from 45 minutes to 60 minutes. In addition, more specific requirements and risk measuring tasks were added to the driving test. The assessment became based on overall competence.

One of the major changes, which may have a more profound effect on the traffic safety of young drivers, was the extended use of an age exemption permit. An age exemption permit allows its holder to obtain a category B driving licence at the age 17. In Finland, young people may start and complete the training for a category B licence at the age 16 but the examination can only be taken at age of 18. Before this reform, the age exemption permit was mainly restricted to health-related reasons in the applicant's family and only a few permits were issued each year.

Finland is quite large but sparsely populated. There are approximately 18.2 persons per km² compared to 109.0 persons per km² in the EU. Variation within the country is also great: Lapland has on average 1.9 persons per km², while Uusimaa, an area around the capital region in southern Finland, has a population density of 187 persons per km². Public transportation is not comprehensive everywhere in the country (already before the covid-19 epidemic), which was one of the reasons to extend the use of the age exemption permit. After the reform, special reasons for issuing the age exemption permit include long distances and the lack of public transportation that

regularly impede travel to and from school, work, training taking place at the workplace or regular, goal-oriented hobby activities, and health-related reasons that hinder or prevent regular travel.

The age exemption permit became very popular. Since 1 July 2018, over 51,000 permits have been issued. There is an obvious need for mobility among young people in Finland. At present, approximately 20 percent of 17-year-olds have a category B driving licence. The question is what kinds of consequences this will have for traffic safety. How do 17-year-olds manage in traffic? We have been monitoring the situation closely ever since the reform entered into force.

One of our first observations was that the age exemption permit might have a positive effect on traffic safety. Accidents involving young drivers decreased in 2019 and 2020. Traffic injuries of 17-year-old passenger car drivers increased in 2020 but at the same time, the total number of injuries among this age group decreased, because injuries resulting from moped and motorcycle accidents reduced from previous years. There was an assumption that maybe young people were waiting to get an exemption permit for category B and gave up on using moped or motorbike for mobility.

At the same time, some 17 year olds novice drivers got in the headlines for dangerous behavior in traffic. There were some very bad accidents where lives were lost. We wanted to find out how much age had to do with the dangerous behavior in traffic and decided to compare traffic offences leading to a temporary driving ban among different age groups. The time frame was from 1st of July 2018 to 31st of August 2020 and total number of driving license holders in our study was 101 684.

The analysis was very beneficiary and provided us a lot information of novice drivers' behavior in first months and first year in traffic, not just for the 17 year olds but 18 and 19 year old novice drivers. The results were very interesting. The analysis gave us also information on how our new training and testing system is working. Based on these findings, the Finnish Ministry of Transport and Communications drafted a proposal for amending the driving licence legislation. The proposal contains additional measures that will promote traffic safety among young drivers.

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