



The test of time

Compulsory driving tests were introduced 75 years ago – but are in need of an overhaul to meet modern demands, argues **Dr Lisa Dorn**

The infrastructure of our society is underpinned by extensive and frequent car use, but the age of mass motoring came at a price. By the 1930s motoring had become more affordable and increasingly popular, but in 1934 7,343 people were killed with only 2.4 million vehicles on the road. The compulsory driving test was introduced on 1 June 1935 to combat the rising levels of fatalities – and within a year road deaths had fallen by nearly a thousand.

Seventy-five years later there have been few changes to the driving test, yet in 2008 2,538 people were killed on UK roads, with over 30 million vehicles registered. This represents the lowest annual number of casualties since official records began in 1926. The question is – what are the road safety benefits of the current driving test? Is it still fit for purpose?

In recent decades, there have been many advances in road and vehicle engineering and the road environment, including a tenfold increase in traffic. Vehicle performance has improved dramatically, requiring ever more ingenious safety features to mitigate the effects of a crash. We also have widespread use of sophisticated in-vehicle technology such as mobile phones, with the potential to severely distract a driver's attention. In recent times, key contributors to crash involvement reflect fundamental changes in our society, with around one in six people killed on UK roads being the result of drink driving and around 20 per cent with illegal drugs in their system at the time of death.

There is little evidence that passing a driving test means novice drivers are safe; indeed they are more at risk of crash involvement post-test than at any other time in their driving careers. Research shows that for the first six months after the test, nearly 20 per cent reported having a crash and 70 per cent had a near miss. The ability of the test to identify those drivers that go on to be involved in a crash is rather limited – no relationship has been found between the number of faults committed on the driving test and crash involvement.

Knowledge of rules and traffic laws is often used as a measure of driving safety, and the driving test includes a theory component. However, increased knowledge seems to have little bearing on whether or not someone is likely to be involved in a crash. Findings indicate that driving records were no different for drivers who passed a traffic law test compared with those that did not take the traffic law test. Recent research

shows no association between a road safety-based knowledge test and collisions.

The reason for the poor relationship between test components and crash involvement is because liability depends on many factors other than driving standards. Young drivers in particular are over-represented in crash statistics, probably due to their increased exposure to risk. There are also well-documented attitudinal and behavioural factors associated with risk-taking, especially in the presence of peers. Young drivers also lack the ability to observe relevant information and judge traffic situations. This begs the question whether the current driving test is still fit for purpose in our modern car-based society.

Researchers have recommended greater focus on hazard-perception training as part of driver

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licensing. Driver education software companies have developed online cognitive tasks to train key skills including eye-scanning abilities in realistic video-based driving environments. Another important improvement would be to increase post-licence driving experience among new drivers while limiting risk exposure. Graduated driver licensing allows drivers to gain experience under less risky driving situations including restrictions to night driving, passengers in the car, motorway and blood alcohol limit. Post-licence driving experience is associated with up to 50 per cent reduction in crash rates in the first six months of driving.

Ninety-four million driving tests have been carried out in the UK since 1935 and it remains one of the essential ingredients for road safety. The driving test can be relied upon to impart basic vehicle-control skills, but should not be expected to improve road safety directly. There is no doubt that it could reflect the current driving landscape and contribute more. Most importantly, the future driving test should promote the development of self-evaluation skills. ■

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