

IAM Report - Older drivers – Safe or Unsafe? Briefing

Q - What is the research?

A - An analysis by road safety researcher Jean Hopkin that compares the crash circumstances of 30,000 drivers over the age of 60 with the crash circumstances of 28,000 drivers in their 50s, over the seven year period between 2000 and 2006 (Page 3)

Q - Why did IAM commission it?

A – Because it is probably one of the most important issues of an ageing population, and one where the IAM has the skills and knowledge to help older drivers to continue to drive for as long as they want to, safely. Our DriveCheck 55 programme is designed to do just that (Page 30)

Q – How will the ageing population affect drivers?

A - Today, three quarters of men and one third of women over the age of 70 have a driving license; over the next 30 years the number of over 70s will increase substantially, as will those driving – the number of male drivers over 70 on the roads will double, and the number of women drivers will treble (Pages 4, 5, 6)

Q - What is the key message from the research?

A - It is that older drivers (drivers over the age of 60) as a group are safer than most other age groups, and substantially safer than drivers in their teens and twenties ie 8 per cent of drivers are over 70, yet they are involved in around 4 per cent of injury crashes, but the 15 per cent of drivers who are in their and twenties are involved in 34 per cent

Q – But doesn't your report show that an older driver's safety declines with age and into advanced age?

A – NO. Older drivers are not a homogeneous group. Like drivers of all ages, as individuals, they can be good drivers, or bad drivers. However, ours and other research suggests that an older person is much more likely to be killed or seriously injured in a crash than a younger person because of age related frailty; age related mental and physical changes can make some more likely to make driving errors, but not in all of them. On the other hand, there are driving situations where older drivers are safer than younger drivers

Q – Can you give examples from the IAM research where and when older drivers are safer than younger drivers, and say why?

A – As a group and generalising, older drivers tend not to commit speeding offences, they don't drink and drive, they don't take illegal drugs; they are also more likely to adopt a more cautious and restrained driving style. This shows in the crash statistics, eg they have smaller proportions of KSI crashes on bends, and while overtaking, while in 30mph areas their safety performance overall is about the same as drivers in their 50s (Pages 8, 9 10)

Q – Any other examples where and why they are safer?

A- Again, as a group and generalising, older drivers tend to 'self regulate' their driving, eg compared with drivers in their 50s, older drivers have a smaller proportion of KSI crashes in peak traffic periods, in the dark and on motorways, because they tend to avoid driving at times and places they are not comfortable with (Pages 10, 11)

Q – OK, that’s when older drivers are more safe – when and where are they less safe?

A – Again, as a group and generalising, compared with drivers in their 50s, older drivers are particularly at risk at junctions on high speed roads, and in crashes where no other vehicle, pedestrian or cyclist, is involved (Pages 12,13,14,15)

Q - Why such a problem at junctions, and why single vehicle crashes?

A – Again, as a group and generalising, older drivers can be less able than younger ones to assess and deal with complex traffic at fast speeds, they need more time to process information, and they make decisions more slowly, all of which when combined at a junctions with fast traffic can make them vulnerable. Single vehicle crashes suggest that an older driver’s skills and abilities can begin to deteriorate at around the age of 70/75 Pages 13, 14, 15 & 24,25, 26)

Q – So, some are less safe than others, can anything be done to make them safer?

A – Definitely YES. IAM has identified 5 key areas for attention Page 17, but just repeated her):

- 1. Information on new risks – informing older drivers why, where and when their skills honed over many years of driving may start to fail will encourage them to develop new skills to put them less at risk**
- 2. Driving assessments – encouraging older drivers to undertake regular assessments designed to identify where, when and why they may be more at risk, and to show them how that risk can be reduced**
- 3. Managing impairment – through information and driving assessments, show older drivers practical ways to overcome the age-related decline in skills, such as advanced route planning and tailored driving techniques**
- 4. Engineering safer roads – designing and managing roads themselves to meet the needs of the growing population of older drivers; this would also benefit drivers of all ages**
- 5. Adapting vehicles – design vehicles to meet the needs of older drivers and encourage the fitting of extras that will help safe driving, such as additional mirrors**

Q – What should older drivers do now, can they help themselves?

A – There are several self-help actions they can take (overall conclusion and sound advice from IAM):

- Understand and accept that their driving skills honed over many years may be affected by the aging process, and from the information in this IAM report they can understand themselves where, when and why they may be at risk. Then they can take extra care to avoid the pitfalls we have identified**
- Take a driving assessment that will show them their driving strengths and weaknesses**
- Through information on their risk, and with a driving assessment, learn how to manage their driving weaknesses eg advanced route planning to avoid risky places, and tailored driving techniques learned from driving assessment**

Q - Are driving assessments for older drivers widely available?

A – YES. Many local authorities do them, and of course the IAM offers its own DriveCheck55 (IAM programme Page 30)

Q – But all that said, surely there comes a time when an older driver should give up the car keys

A – That time may well come, but in the meantime an older driver can be helped to continue to drive for as long as he/she is able to do so, safely. When the driver, or his/her family thinks there might be problems with driving, a driving assessment should be the first option to see just how well or badly the driver performs (common sense)

Q – What can children of older drivers do if they are concerned about mum or dad’s driving?

A – Most older drivers know themselves when the time has come, and they stop driving. But if not it can be one of the most difficult aspects for the family to handle, and it really depends on the relationship between parent and son/daughter. Persuading mum or dad to take an independent driving assessment would be a good start; a direct approach via the family about giving up driving may, or may not, be the right course of action, sometimes it may be better coming from an old and trusted friend, rather than family

Q – Isn’t this just pussyfooting around the fundamental issue – driving is a privilege and not a right and older drivers should undergo a medical examination and compulsory re-testing at 70, and regularly thereafter?

A – NO. This and other research shows quite clearly that there is no road safety case for an age-related compulsory medical, or driver re-testing. Older drivers are not an unacceptable risk on our roads, they are as safe as almost all other age groups, and those with some age related driving issues can be helped with information and driving assessments. Overall, there are other good reasons for helping older drivers to continue to drive for as long as they are safely able to (Page 16)

Q – What are the other good reasons for helping older drivers to continue to drive?

A - A mobile older population can keep in touch with family and friends; they can live more independent lives; they can travel to shops, health and essential services without those services having to be taken to them

Ideas for debate

Restricted (Conditional) licensing (Page 3 and repeated on page 17)

There is a risk that the media may not understand our suggestion of a review of driver licensing for over 70 drivers.

- **The IAM report says very clearly on Page 3 and repeated on Page 17:
 - **"Should there be a new a new restricted license that would allow older drivers facing withdrawal of their licence to continue to drive in a defined local area that avoids high risk driving situations the report has highlighted?"****
- **The Restricted (Conditional) licence is used in the USA and Australia to allow only some drivers who would usually have their license withdrawn because they are deemed unfit to drive to continue to drive, but under special and strict conditions**
- **The point to emphasise is that older drivers are not a homogeneous group - they are individuals and must be considered as individuals. At the moment, all UK drivers are licenced to drive anywhere, and the decision to withdraw the licence from an older driver is based on that fact i.e our driving licence system is ‘all or nothing’**

- Our suggestion is for a discussion on a **Restricted (Conditional) licence** is as an **alternative** to withdrawal of the licence, **but only** for those drivers who, after an assessment, may be considered safe enough to drive only on local roads in their local area, e.g to shop locally, go to church, visit the doctor etc

Review of the 70 age cut-off point for a licence

- Ours and other reports suggest that 70 may no longer be the right age and that there could be a case for moving it to 75. However, we have not come out strongly either way because it needs a thorough review rather than a dogmatic call, for example, how many drivers are stopped from driving at the first renewal at 70, and the next one at 73; what are the risks of a change and what would be the benefits
- We need answers to these and other questions before IAM would take a stance either way. However, we believe there is a case for a review that the Government should undertake

Final Question - What are the key messages from the research?

A – They are:

- Older drivers are not a homogeneous group, like drivers of all ages, as individuals, they can be good drivers, or bad drivers
- As a group they are safer than most other age groups eg 8 per cent of drivers are over 70, yet they are involved in around 4 per cent of injury crashes, but the 15 per cent of drivers who are in their and teens and twenties are involved in 34 per cent
- Most of their risk is a personal one, they much more likely to be killed or seriously injured in a crash than a younger driver because of age related frailty
- Age related mental and physical changes can make some more likely to make driving errors, but not in all of them
- On the other hand, there are driving situations where older drivers are safer than younger drivers
- There is no road safety case for a compulsory medical or driving re-test
- Those older drivers who may have some age related driving issues can be helped with information and driving assessments
- A mobile older population can keep in touch with family and friends; they can live more independent lives; they can travel to shops, health and essential services without those services having to be taken to them