

## NEWLY ARRIVED

# REFUGEE COMMUNITIES AND DRIVING

This broadsheet focuses on issues around driving for recent arrivals from refugee backgrounds and reports on some of the challenges experienced, particularly by African communities. Insights into strategies for improving driver safety are derived from two studies: Good Starts for Refugee Youth and an Honours thesis entitled 'Road and Driver Safety in the Victorian Sudanese Community: Exploring the Issue from Perspectives of Service Providers.'

## Experiences of driving prior to arrival in Australia

Being able to drive a car can be an important part of settlement in Australia. However, for some newly arrived refugee communities learning to drive in Australia presents particular challenges.

- Many recently arrived refugees in Victoria have experienced vastly different driving environments prior to their settlement in Australia. This impacts on perceptions of road safety as well as their assumptions about traffic regulations: "...you may not have to get a license, you won't have to get a road worthy car, you might not have terribly many road rules...to follow" (Service provider).
- Personal ownership of a car is less common in some countries of origin of people from refugee backgrounds than in Australia. In many countries having access to a car is not required to undertake everyday activities. In many African countries the meaning attached to owning a car is different: "In Africa... a car is a social luxury, if you have a car it means you are rich person... while in Australia having a car is a necessity...you don't...need to be rich" (Service provider).



Melbourne city traffic, 2007

Major road in Rumbek, Southern Sudan. Atwell © 2005.

## JOHN'S STORY

John arrived in Australia in 2004 at the age of 16. When John turned 18, he bought a car for \$2000. He takes pride in his car and likes making additions to it such as having windows tinted and installing a racing-car steering wheel. Because he had no one to teach him about driving, he initially taught himself to drive before obtaining a Learner's permit. He enjoys driving and regularly takes his family and friends to the shops or to attend medical and other appointments. His father has a Learner's permit but doesn't like to drive which puts more pressure on John to drive, as the family live in a suburb without adequate public transportation. After learning more about driving in Australia, John sat and passed his Learner's permit test and had a few driving lessons. Soon after getting his L plates he was pulled over and given a warning by the police for driving without a fully licensed person. For a while this deterred him from driving which reduced his ability to gain driving experience. Because he couldn't afford more driving lessons and couldn't find qualified drivers to accompany him, he began to drive by himself again but without displaying his L plates. When John felt he had enough driving experience, he sat his probationary driving test but failed twice. In both cases this was due to being unable to reverse parallel-park. John is upset that he now needs to pay for another driving test. His uncle was also angry and thought John had been treated unfairly. John is very keen to get his probationary licence so he can lawfully drive but is even more worried now that he has failed several times: "...I want to get my P and then drive and then they fail me now, I don't know." A driving instructor who had given John some lessons in the past offered to take him for three practice runs before trying for his P plates test a third time.

## LESSONS and INSIGHTS

- The vastly different driver environments experienced before arrival to Australia contribute to a lack of understanding about road safety.
- Financial issues, the high cost of driving lessons and lack of access to driving mentors/teachers impact negatively on the acquisition of road safety knowledge and driving skills.
- Low level of English language and a lack of access to appropriate learning materials act as barriers to formal learning about driver and road safety.
- The above barriers are reasons why some recently arrived individuals drive without first acquiring the appropriate permits or drive without the necessary experience to ensure their own and other's safety.

## What factors have an impact on driving in Australia?

### Barriers to information and knowledge

- A lack of knowledge and understanding about licensing regulations in Australia leads to instances of driving without an appropriate licence: "...in Sudan there is no such thing as learner... probationary and then full license. You either got your license or you don't". New Victorian licensing requirements effective from July 1st, 2008 involve stricter testing and more demands on Learner and probationary drivers.
- Materials used for driver education and testing are not always in an appropriate language for newly arrived refugees: "...when I wanted the test, the lady asked me 'do you need an interpreter?' said no, she said 'what language do you speak?' I told her my language and she said 'oh no, we don't have this...are you Dinka?'"
- While road safety education begins in early childhood for the Australian-born (through school education and public education campaigns), newly arrived refugees have not been exposed to such information and it is not provided in on-arrival orientation.
- Even though accredited interpreters may be made available at the time of driver testing, they sometimes lack knowledge of driving terminology: "English is too hard you know? I bring the interpreter you know? The

interpreter he didn't know some words...it was too hard." (Male, 21 years).

- Inaccurate information about driving is sometimes acquired through informal networks of family, friends and work colleagues.
- A lack of knowledge about owning a car in Australia acts as a barrier to being able to make informed choices about total expenses and ongoing-costs of car ownership including insurance, registration, repairs and petrol.

### Financial issues

- Many newly-arrived refugees have pre-existing debts and provide financial support to family and relatives overseas, as well as supporting their families in Australia.
- Employment opportunities are limited and Centrelink benefits are not adequate to meet these financial needs.
- Professional driving lessons, licence tests and instruction materials may be too expensive.
- Individuals are often unaware of financial penalties for late or non-payment of fines accrued for traffic offences, leading to financial stress. "This country is very hard, if you do some mistake they put a black [mark]." (Male, 20 years).

### Necessity of owning a car

- Family ownership of a car in Australia is often a necessity in settlement. This is especially true in outer suburbs where reliable public transportation is not available: "...I wanna go somewhere you know? I can't go by bus – sometimes the bus is not

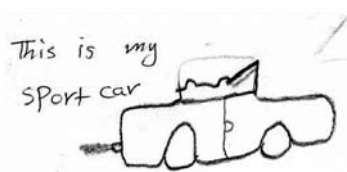
available" (Male, 21 years).

- For many families, employment can be insecure and cars are needed in order to maintain employment: "...if you don't have a car you can't work." (Male, 20 years).
- Families often need a car to be able to attend appointments (e.g. medical) and to carry out daily activities (e.g. shopping, visiting friends and family, and to going to places of worship).

### Lack of access to qualified drivers who can act as teachers and mentors

- People are utilising informal strategies to learn how to drive because there are few individuals in newly arrived communities who have been in Australia for a sufficient amount of time to assist them with 'peer education.'
- Young people are sometimes given the responsibility of driving for family and friends before obtaining an appropriate licence, because adults in the family may be unable to obtain a licence.
- Sometimes young people are living without a parent or guardian.

*Driver and road safety is an important part of being able to participate in Australian society and effective strategies for facilitating safe driving are central to resettlement policies and programs. Many from newly arrived communities have spent much of their lives in environments where, for most, driving is not part of everyday life. Thus there is little individual or collective experience of driving or road safety. The necessity of owning a car combined with few opportunities to gain driving experience pose major challenges for many refugee arrivals. Specially targeted driver education programs have been conducted in Melbourne by local police, local secondary schools, TAFE, Youth Services, community groups and the Traffic Accident Commission (TAC). These programs have made important contributions to improving driver and road safety among recently arrived communities.*



## ABOUT THE STUDIES

**Road and Driver Safety in the Victorian Sudanese Community: Exploring the Issue from Perspectives of Service Providers.** This was a small research project by G. Barber (2007) in the School of Public Health, La Trobe University. This research involved qualitative interviews with seven service providers currently working with newly arrived refugees.

**The Good Starts Study** is a five year study following a group of 120 refugee young people, to identify the social determinants of wellbeing and to inform policy and practice about how to support good settlement outcomes for refugee youth. For more information about the study see: [www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee\\_youth.html](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/rhrc/refugee_youth.html)