

STR and VTI initiate debate on lowering of the driving licence age

A lowering of the driving licence age is being proposed by the EU parliament. Major shortages of commercial drivers are given as the reason. STR (the Swedish National Association of Driver Trainers) and VTI (the Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute) feel this risks lowering traffic safety. They have jointly started a debate on this issue in one of Sweden's leading national newspapers, Svenska Dagbladet.

The EU parliament wants to make it possible for 17-year-olds to hold driving licences for both cars and trucks provided they are "accompanied by an experienced driver." Additionally, 18-year-olds are to be able to hold driving licences for trucks and/or buses carrying up to 16 passengers. If this happens, it will entail a radical change in Sweden's driving licence system. Currently, drivers of buses with up to 16 passengers must be at least 21. The debate initiators feel a lower qualifying age would have "significant negative effects on accident trends."

"Giving thousands of teenagers the possibility of driving trucks and buses goes against everything we know about traffic safety," write Sonja Forward (a senior research leader at VTI) and Maria Stenman, Jeanette Jedbäck Hindenburg and Christer Wickman (respectively, STR's acting chair, vice chair and association secretary). In their text, they refer to brain research that indicates an individual's ability to appreciate the consequences of his or her actions is not fully developed until they are around 23 to 24 years old. Lowering the driving licence age would thus prejudice traffic safety. The four writers also note that, compared to all other age groups, 18 to 20-year-olds feature far more frequently in traffic accidents¹ involving injuries.

The debate initiators observe that: "The correct path to there being more commercial drivers is not a radical lowering of the qualifying age and deregulation that shuts its eyes to the facts. Rather, it is: good car-driving training that includes attitude; long driving experience; and, after that, a good work environment and good conditions." Their text concludes: "The issue is now before the government. Is it really going to lower traffic safety on Sweden's roads for short-term transport gains?"

In response, Caj Luoma, Anna Grönlund and Håkan Nilsson (representing, respectively, the Swedish Confederation of Transport Enterprises, the Swedish Bus and Coach Federation and the Swedish Road Transport Employers' Association) write that VTI's and STR's conclusions are wrong because: "They make no distinction between drivers of commercial vehicles and drivers of private cars." Luoma, Grönlund and Nilsson assert that there is too little research in the area and that existing research is misinterpreted. According to the three representatives, young commercially qualified drivers are low risk. They maintain that a study by one of the members of the Swedish Confederation of Transport Enterprises shows that young drivers present zero increased risk of accidents. Their text concludes: "Young people who want to be commercial drivers must not be impeded by old-fashioned regulations. To become tomorrow's commercial drivers, they must be given the right conditions via modern, professional courses that are built

¹ "18 to 24-year-old drivers of private cars involved in fatal accidents in 2001 – Analysis of the Swedish Road Administration's in-depth study materials", (Swedish only) <https://www.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:1363416/FULLTEXT01.pdf>.

on: current findings about learning; traffic safety; and, digital supports for a climate-smart, efficient transport sector.”

In its final reply, the VTI/STR quartet answered that it had no wish at all to impede anyone becoming a commercial driver; quite the reverse. Nonetheless, at the same time, there is no ignoring the fact that young drivers of 18 to 24 present a higher accident risk than do other age groups. Furthermore, a meta-study² has shown that the risk of accidents is highest for two groups of commercial drivers, namely, the young and the old. Accidents involving this young group are attributed to lack of experience, underdeveloped perceptual ability and overestimation of own driving skill.

This final reply also contested the argument that commercial drivers approach safety differently than do private motorists. Reference was here made to various speed surveys that are regularly carried out. One of these, conducted by Folksam (a major insurance and savings company) in Greater Stockholm and Uppsala County, showed that 78 per cent of commercial drivers broke speed limits.

The VTI/STR foursome also point out³ that, from 2010 to 2022, trucks were involved in 25 per cent of all fatal accidents. In the same period, trucks accounted for 17 per cent of vehicle mileage. Reference was additionally made to the Swedish Transport Administration, which is indicating that, in accidents involving heavy trucks, there is a trend towards an ever increasing percentage of fatalities.

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² Jakobsen, M. D., et al. (2023) *Influence of occupational risk factors for road traffic crashes among professional drivers: systematic review*, *Transport Reviews*, 43:3, 533-563, DOI: 10.1080/01441647.2022.2132314. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/01441647.2022.2132314>

³ Gregersen, N. P., Forward, S. (2024). *Traffic safety – The interaction between people, vehicles and traffic environment*, second edition (Swedish only). Nordstedt Juridik, Stockholm, Sweden