



AND STILL THEY ARE DYING

A rise in the road toll has governments looking for new solutions to a problem that continues to rob our community of precious lives.

Photos: Newspix and AAP

For the first time in five years, Australia's road toll has increased, leading to renewed efforts to stem the carnage on our roads. The 2005 toll of 1,635 people killed on Australian roads was 52 more than 2004, bucking the downward trend that had seen the overall per capita fatality rate fall from a record 30.4 deaths per 100,000 people in 1970 to 7.7 deaths per 100,000 in 2004.

The increase is a worrying sign for federal, state and territory governments, which in 2001 agreed on an ambitious target to bring the fatality rate down to 5.6 deaths per 100,000 by 2010, a 40 per cent reduction that would save 3,600 lives.

"Up until the end of 2004, Australia was well on track to achieving that 2010 fatality reduction target," federal Roads Minister Jim Lloyd told the House of Representatives. "However, sadly, 2005 was a disappointing year for road safety."

Mr Lloyd made the comments while presenting to the parliament the federal government's response to a major report on road safety by the House of Representatives Transport Committee. That report, *Eyes on the road ahead*, contained 38 recommendations to improve road safety. A number of the recommendations were aimed at addressing the over-representation of young male drivers in road fatalities.

Continued page 42 ▶

An important initiative outlined in the government response is the trial of a new compulsory education program designed to change the attitudes of young drivers. The \$10 million trial, to commence in NSW and Victoria this year, is based on a successful campaign in Finland. It will help young drivers understand their limitations, change their attitudes and increase their skills.

"It is important we have this trial, because we want to ensure that any novice driver training scheme is not something that encourages young drivers to think—even more than they do now—that they are bullet proof, that they have been trained as expert drivers," Mr Lloyd said.

"The program is based on learning methods that will help young drivers gain true insight into their own limitations and the risks they face on the roads, leading to safer and better driver behaviour," he said.

The Finnish program comprised three parts: a one-on-one, in-car assessment; an off-road section; and group discussion. Results of the program showed a significant reduction in crashes, particularly for young male drivers.

The moves to improve driver education in Australia coincide with an examination of graduated licensing systems. State governments have been looking at the feasibility of introducing night driving restrictions or same-age passenger restrictions which have been effective in other countries.

"More needs to be done to reduce the road toll, and our report, *Eyes on the road ahead*, points to those things," said Deputy Chair of the Transport Committee, Steve Gibbons (Member for Bendigo, Vic).

"I agree, we could be doing better," said Committee Chairman, Paul Neville (Member for Hinkler, Qld). "As we plan roads we need to be consciously building in safety as we go, rather than building a road and then coming back to see how we could make it safer."

With this in mind, the federal government has committed \$12.7 billion dollars, mostly for road construction, as part of the Auslink program, with \$178 million in black spot road funding.

"Road safety is a collective responsibility involving all governments at all levels, industry groups, community organisations and each and every one of us as individuals," Mr Lloyd said.

"Sadly, 2005 was a disappointing year for road safety."

"The Australian government will continue to work with these groups to find new solutions that can drastically cut the trauma on our roads. But, ultimately, no matter how much you spend on roads, no matter how much you upgrade the roads and no matter how much you improve the technology of the vehicles, road safety depends on the actions of individuals," he said.

Transport Committee member, Patrick Secker (Member for Barker, SA) agrees. "No amount of speed limits will stop the habitual speeder, the inattentive driver, the sleepy driver or the stupid driver who overtakes in a dangerous manner," he said.

"The priority of reducing speed limits even though cars are safer and roads are better in many cases leads me to

think that other priorities should be addressed, such as better designs for vehicles and roads, and driver education. This may continue the reduction in the road toll without this undue priority to reducing speed limits, which is cynically seen by many as mere revenue raising by state governments," he said.

Nevertheless, speed limits will continue to be examined as an important element in reducing the road toll. Current priorities include reducing speed limits in areas with high pedestrian activity, reducing speed limits on roads with poor crash records, and reducing speed limits on high-risk rural roads.

According to Jim Lloyd, rural roads are largely to blame for the recent increase in fatalities.

"Preliminary analysis of these deaths that occurred over Christmas showed that most of these tragedies occurred on country roads, and involved motorists losing control, hitting trees, overturning or crossing into the path of oncoming traffic," he said.

"I wonder how many of the 78 people who died over the Christmas-New Year period actually heard my message about being safe on our roads over Christmas and, like all of us, thought, yeah that's right, we'll be safe, and it won't happen to us." ■

The House of Representatives Transport Committee's report, Eyes on the road ahead, and the government response are available at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/trs/reports.htm or for more information email trs.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 2352.

