



Keeping our eyes on the road

Thousands of Australians are killed or maimed on our roads every year. Trying to curb this tragic carnage is the bold ambition of a House of Representatives report on national road safety.

On average every year, about 1,700 Australians are killed in road accidents and many more are seriously injured with an economic cost of about \$15 billion a year.

"In 2003, 1,634 people died on Australian roads," said Transport Committee Chairman Paul Neville (Member for Hinkler, Qld).

"While this was an improvement on the previous year, it still marks a worrying trend—the improvement in Australia's road safety record over the last two decades has levelled out."

Mr Neville said the report, *National road safety—Eyes on the road ahead*, addresses a wide range of road safety issues.

"It proposes a range of solutions to matters both big and small, all of which have the potential to save lives," he said.

"Overall, the report highlights the need for a national approach to road safety. As a nation, we must ensure that all stakeholders, including governments, vehicle manufacturing and motoring groups, and road users generally are aware of their responsibilities for improving road safety. Ongoing investment in the safety of our roads and vehicles, in driver education and in effective law enforcement are all vital to reducing the road toll, a goal which interests every member of the community."

A total of 38 recommendations are contained in the committee's report, which is available at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/trs/roadsafety/report.htm or for more information email trs.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 2352. ■

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Most pedestrians struck by a car at 40 km/h survive; most pedestrians struck by a car at 60km/h die.

With excessive speed regarded as one of the main causes of road crashes that often result in death or serious injury, the House of Representatives Transport Committee has recommended all states and territories set a uniform 50 kilometre per hour speed limit on suburban streets.

Besides pushing for uniform national 50 km/h speed limits on local urban roads, the committee also recommends uniform 60 km/h speed limits on urban arterial roads and exemption provisions for rural communities from uniform national urban speed limits.

Speed management has been the cornerstone of the National Road Safety Strategy and National Road Safety Action Plans with a number of measures having already been introduced.

Speed affects both the risk of crashing and, as the following statistics highlight, the severity of a crash:

- a 20 per cent increase in travel speed (for example, from 50 km/h to 60 km/h) increases emergency braking distance by almost half (44 per cent);
- at the point where a driver braking from 60 km/h would stop completely, a driver braking from 70 km/h would still be travelling at about 46 km/h—a speed that could be fatal if the vehicle hit a pedestrian or the side of another vehicle; and
- most pedestrians struck by a car at 40 km/h survive; most pedestrians struck by a car at 60km/h die.

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The *National Road Safety Action Plan 2003 and 2004* found that speed enforcement programs backed by extensive publicity proved a significant factor in the reduction in road fatalities that occurred between 1989 and 1997. And even greater compliance would reduce road deaths significantly.

Encouraged by reported results in Europe and the United Kingdom, in late 1999 the Roads and Traffic Authority in NSW began a program of installing and evaluating fixed digital speed cameras. The decision was made to install the cameras on roads with demonstrated speed and crash problems, and to clearly signpost the presence of cameras to maximise compliance.

After two years' operation, there was a very pronounced reduction in the proportion of vehicles exceeding the speed limit in all speed zones and there was a pronounced reduction in the proportion of vehicles exceeding the speed limit by more than 10 km/h.

The resulting reduction of road accidents was impressive. In the three years prior to the installation of cameras, the selected lengths of road incurred 21 fatalities. In the two years subsequent to the cameras being installed only one fatality occurred and was unrelated to speed.

Overall, tow-away crashes were reduced by 17 per cent, injury crashes by 20 per cent, 'casualty crashes' (injury and fatality combined) by 23 per cent, and fatality crashes by 90 per cent.

Eric Howard of VicRoads said Victoria deliberately took a different path to NSW in the use of speed cameras.

"There has been increased use of mobile cameras, and their covert operation, the philosophy being that, if you speed anywhere any time, you may be detected," Mr Howard said.

"We are saying, 'We don't want you to speed anywhere any time.' That has been accompanied by tougher tolerances—lower enforcement levels, some fixed cameras, speed and red light cameras, tougher penalties and lower thresholds for demerit points."

The Victorian strategy also proved a dramatic success.

A doubling of infringements (from about 50,000 to 100,000 a month) coincided with

a decline in fatalities from May 2002. Since then, infringements have returned to average levels, but fatalities have continued to fall.

Mr Howard also told the committee of the results of lower urban speed limits in Victoria. Fatalities on metropolitan 50 km/h and 60 km/h roads had fallen from 110 per annum to around 55 per annum—"an enormous reduction in risk on those roads".

In contrast, there had been almost no discernible reduction in fatalities on rural 100 km/h and 110 km/h roads.

Chairman of the Pedestrian Council of Australia, Harold Scruby, urged the committee to "go national with 50 kilometres per hour".

"It is coming, and it is great," Mr Scruby said. "You only have to look at Victoria who went with it first. They now have the lowest pedestrian death rate ever."

The committee recommended that the federal government initiate the adoption under the next National Road Safety Action Plan of:

- uniform national 50 km/h speed limits on local urban roads;
- uniform national 60 km/h speed limits on urban arterial roads; and
- exemption provisions for rural communities from uniform national urban speed limits. ■



"The majority of those killed are male, and are young males."

Young men and fast cars are a proven deadly combination that demands a change of culture to prevent future fatal accidents.

The House Transport Committee report found young male drivers were "probably the group at greatest risk on the road" and "are over-represented in road fatality statistics".

In evidence to the committee, Executive Director of Western Australia's Office of Road Safety, Ian Cameron, believed that one reason for their liking of excessive speed was attitudinal.

According to Mr Cameron, around eight per cent of young males admitted to regularly exceeding the speed limit by more than 10 kilometres an hour.

"They say things like, 'The road rules are for everyone else. I know what I am doing. I've got a good car'," Mr Cameron said.

Similar attitudes were encountered with regard to the wearing of seatbelts.

"The majority of those killed are male, and are young males. They believe a seatbelt will protect them in the event of having a crash, but they do not believe they are going to have a crash. They think, 'I've got a good car, I'm a good driver and I know these roads'."

While recognising that every jurisdiction in Australia has developed strategies for novice drivers, the committee called for a national youth road safety strategy and action plan.

This strategy must incorporate new thinking on the best way to encourage young people to use roads safely, the committee said. New approaches must be found that engage young people on their own terms.

Dr Zoe Sofoulis and Dr Sarah Redshaw, of the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney, questioned the value of current road safety campaigns, especially with regard to young people.

They told the committee that road safety campaigns typically made "authoritarian and sometimes traumatic appeals to audiences", with the general message being obey the law or suffer.

According to Dr Sofoulis, such campaigns do nothing to encourage a shared sense of responsibility for safety on the road and are readily rejected by young drivers on a variety of grounds. This includes lack of identification with the category of citizen, blanket resistance to any message issuing from the police or a traffic authority, disputes on technical points and optimistic or overconfident estimates of skill in surviving a similar crash scenario.

Both Dr Sofoulis and Dr Redshaw believe youth needed to be specifically targeted in road safety campaigns. They told the committee that road safety messages for young people might well be more effective if they are detached from enforcement

authorities and aligned with issues such as self-esteem, risk and harm minimisation—things that have been successfully used in the health field, for example, around sex and substance abuse.

They argued that, rather than just using gruesome and gory realism, road safety campaigns could incorporate special effects, humour, cartoon and video game formats. These all might be more effective and are unexplored alternatives to stern warnings currently used.

The committee recommended that the federal government ask the Australian Transport Council to develop and implement a national youth road safety strategy and action plan. ■



“Some 27 per cent of driver fatalities had a trace of an illegal drug in their bloodstream.”

Getting all drivers to change their perceptions of risk and what is appropriate behaviour on the road will be the main goal for creating safer roads, but how to shift those attitudes also presented one of the biggest challenges for governments.

Drink driving remains a frightening problem with tragic consequences, especially in rural areas. Despite years of public education and law enforcement, people continue to be killed and seriously injured when not wearing seatbelts.

Speeding also continues to be considered dangerous by most drivers, but seemingly only when other people do it.

The National Motorists Association of Australia noted that young and inexperienced drivers are overrepresented in road fatalities and recommended that “all drivers be required to satisfactorily complete a defensive driving course with an accredited training organisation before progressing beyond (red) P-plates ... The level of training required should be at least equivalent to the successful training provided for motorbike riders”.

The Ulysses [motorcyclists] Club agreed that the training required for gaining a car licence should match that of a motorcyclist.



“...motorcyclists have to undergo a rigorous training and testing program in order to get their motorcycle licence. Car drivers, on the other hand, can be fully trained by their parents, friends or other members of the family. This method of testing is far below the competence level required to obtain a motorcycle licence.

“Since the implementation of compulsory motorcycle training, the fatality rate of motorcyclists, especially those in the 17 to 29 year age range, has plummeted. Motorcyclists in their first year of riding are only permitted to ride machines that are under 250cc in capacity ... Car drivers, on the other hand, can go straight to a V8 or turbo and be permitted to carry as many passengers as they like, often with dire, well publicised consequences.”

Several submissions also advocated special licences for four-wheel drivers and caravan towers.

An individual who wrote to the inquiry, Paul Rebula, called for special licence endorsements for four-wheel drivers: “This could be introduced to ensure drivers understood and could competently handle 4WD vehicles in all conditions. The standard car (2WD) test would be extended to include ‘off-road’ driving. People who successfully completed the test would have their licence endorsed.”

Harold Scruby, from the Pedestrian Council of Australia, argued for even stricter enforcement measures for dangerous behaviour and recidivism. He believed drink drivers should suffer an automatic loss of

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licence, and unlicensed drivers have their vehicles confiscated to curb any temptation to re-offend.

"Unlicensed drivers are estimated to be as high as 12 per cent," Mr Scruby said.

"We must consider the New Zealand system of confiscation of vehicles. There has been a 40 per cent reduction in New Zealand in unlicensed driving. There is no other way to get the recalcitrant driver off the road than to take his or her vehicle."

The committee supported a uniform system of demerit points for unlawful behaviour, to be adopted uniformly across Australia.

The committee recommended the development of a uniform licensing system across Australia, to incorporate:

- graduated licences for novice drivers;
- special licences for four wheel drive vehicles and caravans;

- the use of demerit points to address all major traffic infringements; and
- the suspension or loss of licences to address serious or repeated infringements.

Drugs and alcohol remain significant factors in the growing road toll.

The Western Australian government told the committee that about 25 per cent of drivers killed had a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) above .05 per cent.

Eric Howard, of VicRoads, said that in 2002 "some 27 per cent of driver fatalities had a trace, to some degree, of an illegal psychotropic drug in their bloodstream. That is a fairly sobering statistic".

The committee recommended introducing uniform and tougher penalties for drug and alcohol infringements and a national approach to detecting and dealing with motorists driving under the influence of drugs. ■

"A spot for a tired truckie to pull into."

Research shows that 62 per cent of fatal crashes involving trucks were no fault of the truck driver, so more must be done to help car drivers better understand the perils of colliding with heavy vehicles.

With truck drivers on the road for so many hours every day, other problems being addressed include driver fatigue, drink driving, use of stimulant drugs and medical conditions.

Chris Althaus of the Australian Trucking Association identified a lack of rest areas and poor rest area design as one of his industry's major safety concerns. The ATA called for a national review of truck rest areas.

He said improved fatigue management policies such as driving hours reform would

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"New roads are safer than old roads."

Improving the safety of the road environment will be vital to reducing the road toll.

Road improvements are expected to be responsible for half the reductions in the fatality rate over the life of the National Road Safety Strategy.

The National Road Safety Strategy identified improving the safety of roads as "the single most significant achievable factor in reducing road trauma".

Investment in roads "improves road safety through general road improvements—typically, 'new' roads are safer than 'old' roads—as well as through treatment of black spots".

Roadside hazards were identified as a major factor in some 40 per cent of car occupant fatalities.

The *National Road Safety Action Plan 2003 and 2004* identified a number of cost-effective measures aimed at improving the safety of roads:

- clearance of roadside hazards, or use of barriers to reduce the hazard;
- shoulder sealing, audible edge lining, night-time delineation;



- replacement of intersections by roundabouts;
- programs to minimise the risks posed by utility poles; and
- separating road users, using centre barriers, pedestrian precincts, and bike tracks.

The Australian Automobile Association said investing in safer and more forgiving roads was the highest priority.

"Motorists should be able to travel on Australia's road system in safety, knowing that the features of the road itself, such as sharp bends, will not cause them to lose control. Roads must be of a standard such that the likelihood of a crash is minimised ..."

Eric Howard, of VicRoads, highlighted the alarming prevalence of run-off road accidents on rural roads.

"A high proportion of all casualty crashes on rural roads are run-off-road. The problem is that many rural roads have dangerous roadside environments. The result is that about 70 or 80 per cent of those run-off-road crashes end up hitting a fixed object, mainly a tree ... clearly, where there is vegetation next to a 100 kilometres per hour road, it is high risk."

The committee recommended a 25 per cent increase in the federal government's black spot funding pool for use throughout Australia. ■

be less effective without the infrastructure of rest stops supporting it.

Truck driver Rod Hannifey echoed those sentiments and made convincing arguments as to why there needed to be urgent attention given to this issue.

"An immediate start can be made by just clearing suitable areas on the roadside, which can then be upgraded as funds are available," Mr Hannifey said.

"We do not expect millions to be spent tomorrow, but a start must be made. The Pacific Highway is urgently in need of more rest areas."

Mr Hannifey advocated the adoption of 'blue reflector' rest areas as an interim measure.

"There is currently a trial on the Newell Highway, between Parkes and Gilgandra, of marking informal truck rest areas (just a piece of dirt, often with shade, but not a

recognised rest area) with blue reflectors on roadside guide posts. This has proved very simple and effective and if expanded have the capacity to save lives in showing, with some notice, a spot for a tired truckie to pull into, if a recognised rest area is full or too far away."

The committee endorsed the principle of standardised, coloured reflectors to mark rest areas, but believed the use of another colour than blue would avoid any confusion.

The committee recommended that the federal government request the Australian Transport Council to devise standards for truck rest areas and immediately commence a program for establishing temporary truck rest areas based on interim measures such as standardised, coloured reflector stops. ■

Eyes on the road ahead

The *Eyes on the road ahead* report is available at www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/trs/roadsafety/report.htm or for more information email trs.reps@aph.gov.au or phone (02) 6277 2352.



"What staggers me is that 36 per cent of vehicle occupants killed on rural roads were not wearing a seatbelt."

The House of Representatives Transport Committee believed that vehicle safety measures have great potential to lead to a significant reduction in the road toll, a contribution that as yet has only been partly realised. The main concern is that although many of these measures have been identified, and are often already available, progress in bringing them on-line has been too slow.

More needed to be done to accelerate the uptake of new vehicle safety technology.

Vehicle safety measures—improvements in vehicle compatibility and occupant protection, and new technology to reduce human error—are expected to generate 12 per cent of the 40 per cent reduction in fatalities.

The Ford Motor Company is currently involved in a collaborative research project known as the 'Intelligent SafeCar' project with the Victorian Transport Accident Research Commission and the Monash University Accident Research Centre.

The object of the project is to identify ITS (intelligent transport systems) technologies that promote road safety either by reducing the risk of accidents or reducing road trauma. The technologies being tested include:

- intelligent speed adaptation;
- forward collision warning system;
- breath alcohol detection and advisory system;
- seat belt reminder system; and
- reverse collision warning system.

Alcohol interlocks are widely seen as a looming solution to the problem of drink driving. Eric Howard of VicRoads explained that "interlocks are now required for repeat drink drivers and high-level first offenders".

The Australian Automobile Association was also a strong supporter of alcohol interlocks, "because we believe that if used correctly, alcohol interlocks will be an effective tool in preventing recidivist drink drivers from injuring or endangering the lives of themselves and others".

Failure to wear a seatbelt continues to prove fatal.

Phillip Allan, of the South Australian Department of Transport and Urban Planning, told the committee: "What staggers me—and I am sure it staggers just

about every road safety person—is that 36 per cent of vehicle occupants killed on rural roads in South Australia were not wearing a seatbelt. That absolutely staggers me. The same rule applies and the same trend applies in South Australia that about 95 per cent of people are wearing seatbelts, but it clearly shows the risk you face if you do not have one on."

Director of the Monash University Accident Research Centre, Professor Ian Johnston, raised the issue of speedometers in relation to speeding. He asked, quite reasonably in the committee's view, why speedometers needed to show speeds well in excess of any legal speed limit.

"If we stopped installing speedos that went around to 240 km/h with 100 km/h being at the vertical point, we could really start to discriminate," Professor Johnston said.

"It would be impossible for a vehicle manufacturer to sell on speed and power when the speedo looked like that."

The committee recommended that the federal government immediately introduce an Australian Design Rule for all new vehicles to be fitted with alcohol interlocks and intrusive seat belt warning devices, and also investigate the design of speedometers with a view to bringing them into line with actual speed limits. ■