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Half Yearly Industry Report: Has road safety in Australia reached a crossroads?

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Overview

In recent years, Australia has witnessed a concerning reversal in road safety trends, culminating in the highest road toll in over a decade in 2024, with 1,300 fatalities1. This alarming statistic signifies a resurgence in road deaths, making 2024 the deadliest year since 2012 and the fourth consecutive increase in road fatalities. Current data indicates that the upward trajectory may continue in 2025, as January alone recorded 114 road deaths—an increase of 18.8% compared to the same month in the previous year and 20.5% higher than the average for January over the past five years[1]. These developments raise critical questions about the underlying causes and potential solutions to this concerning trend.

Based on these figures two critical questions remain unanswered. Why is this happening and what can be done about it?

Historically, Australia has made significant strides in reducing road trauma since the 1970s, largely attributed to the Safe System approach. This framework emphasises four pillars—safer roads, safer vehicles, safer speeds, and safer road users—primarily focusing on engineering and enforcement strategies. While these measures have effectively reduced fatalities in the past, they have often neglected the educational aspect and the human factors influencing road safety. Consequently, public awareness of the Safe System concept remains low, with research indicating that only about one-third of the community understands it. This lack of engagement suggests that road users have been disenfranchised and that responsibility for road safety has been largely outsourced to government and law enforcement agencies.

To effect real change in road safety outcomes, experts argue for a shift towards a Social Model of road safety. This model advocates a bottom-up approach that emphasises individual, interpersonal, organisational, community, and public policy functions. By incorporating social influence as a key element, the Social Model aims to foster long-term cultural change regarding road safety, encouraging individuals and communities to take an active role in promoting safer road practices. Despite being outlined in the National Road Safety Strategy 2021-30, the implementation of this model has been

limited, with insufficient action taken to engage the community and leverage its influence effectively[2].

Central to the Social Model is the concept of community engagement, which is crucial for sustainable development. Understanding community perceptions, needs, and aspirations is essential for defining effective road safety strategies. While state agencies are increasingly advocating for community involvement in developing these strategies, detailed policy directions often remain vague. The National Road Safety Strategy sets ambitious targets for reducing annual fatalities and serious injuries by 2030, aiming for a 50% reduction in deaths and a 30% reduction in serious injuries[2].

Australia's road safety landscape stands at a critical juncture. Despite past achievements that have saved countless lives, emerging challenges threaten to reverse these gains. A multifaceted approach that integrates enforcement, education, infrastructure improvements, and technological advancements is essential to continue making progress in reducing road trauma. However, given current trends, it appears that the existing frameworks and paradigms may be insufficient to meet these goals.

This paper examines whether road safety is at a crossroads, evaluating current Australian trends challenges, risks, and potential policy responses.

Introduction

Despite decades of advancements in reducing road trauma, recent trends indicate that improvements have not only stagnated but are also showing troubling annual increases.

Historically, Australia experienced a steady decline in the number of deaths and serious injuries on its roads. In 2019, 1,188 individuals lost their lives on Australian roads, a significant drop from 3,798 fatalities in 19701.

However, since 2020, the consistent reductions in road fatalities have halted, and alarming rates of increase have begun.

In 2024, Australia reported its highest road toll in over a decade, with 1,300 lives lost[1].

This marked the deadliest year since 2012 and represented the fourth consecutive year of rising road fatalities, highlighting a concerning trend in road safety.

Data from early 2025 suggests that this troubling pattern is persisting. In January alone, there were 114 road deaths—an 18.8% increase compared to 96 fatalities in January 2024[1].

Even more shocking, this figure is 20.5% higher than the average for January over the past five years, indicating that road trauma is escalating rather than stabilising1.

These statistics prompt urgent inquiries into the factors contributing to the rise in fatalities. Changes in driver behavior, road conditions, enforcement measures, vehicle safety standards, and broader societal trends may all play a role in the worsening road toll.

The National Road Safety Strategy 2021-2030 outlines Australia's road safety objectives for the next decade, including key priorities and targets aimed at reducing annual fatalities by at least 50% and serious injuries by at least 30% by 2030[2].

In 2021, all federal, state, and territory governments of Australia endorsed the 10-year National Road Safety Strategy, which also included additional targets such as:

- Zero road deaths of children aged seven years and under
- Zero road deaths in city CBD areas
- Zero road deaths on all national highways and high-speed roads

Given the nation's current performance, without effective intervention, Australia is unlikely to meet these road safety targets. Even more concerning, it may be confronting higher levels of road trauma in the years ahead.

The Current State of Road Safety

During the 12 months ending January 2025, there were 1,324 road fatalities, marking a 6.0% increase compared to the previous year[1].

In January 2025 alone, there were 114 road deaths, which is 18 more than the same month last year, reflecting an 18.8% rise from 96 deaths. Current month figures are 20.5% above the average for January over the last five years[1].

To date, there have been 114 road deaths, an 18.8% rise compared to January 2024, when 96 fatalities were recorded. For the 12 months ending January 2025, the national road fatality rate stands at 4.9 deaths per 100,000 individuals, which is 3.9% higher than the same time last year[1].

The fatality rate for the 12 months ending December 2024 was 4.8, showing a 1.7% increase from the previous calendar year[1].

State Comparison

- Total Deaths

For the 12 months ending January 2025, the states which experienced the most road deaths were New South Wales, with 333 (4.9% decrease on the previous 12 months), followed by Queensland with 309 (12.8% increase)[1].

ACT had the lowest number of deaths in the past 12 months, with 10 (150% increase)[1]. So far in 2025, the greatest number of deaths have occurred in Victoria with 35 (66.7%

higher compared to the same period last year), followed by Queensland and New South Wales with 26 and 23 deaths, (30.0% increase and 23.3% decrease, respectively)[1].

- State Fatality Rate

Fatality rates more accurately describe the risk of death within jurisdictions by adjusting for population.

The fatality rate for Northern Territory reached 23.9 deaths per 100,000 people for the 12 months ending January 2025 (83.4% increase from the previous year)[1].

Western Australia had the second highest rate at 6.1 deaths per 100,000 people (9.5% increase from the previous year), although still 3.9 times lower than that of the Northern Territory[1].

The fatality rates of Tasmania and Queensland were 5.9 and 5.5 deaths per 100,000 (0.3% decrease and 10.3% increase from the previous year respectively). ACT reported the lowest fatality rate, at 2.1 deaths per 100,000 population (146.0% increase from the previous year)[1].

Deaths by demographics and circumstances

- Road Users

Road deaths are grouped by vehicle type and position to describe deaths by road user type. By this measure, deaths were most frequently drivers, with 600 in the 12-month period ending January 2025 (0.7% higher than the previous 12 months)[1].

Motorcyclists were the next most highly represented, with 290 deaths in the period (18.9%

increase). 204 passenger road deaths occurred in the period[1].

- Age Group

In the 12-month period ending January 2025, 31.7% of road deaths were aged 40-64 years (420 deaths). This was followed by 20.8% of deaths for those aged 26-39 years (276 deaths)[1].

Comparing the change in deaths by age group for the most recent 12 months compared to previous:

- The cohort with the greatest decrease in deaths was people aged 8-16 years, with 7 fewer deaths (decrease of 14.0%, from 50 to 43 deaths)[1].
- The cohort with the greatest increase in deaths was aged 40-64 years, with 51 more deaths (increase of 13.8% from 369 to 420 deaths)[1].

- Gender

In the past year, around 3.0 times more males than females were involved in fatal crashes. In the 12 months to January 2025, 994 males died in crashes, compared with 326 females[1].

This imbalance has decreased recently, as the road death count for males rose to 994 deaths in the past 12 months, from 958 in the previous (3.8% increase), compared to female road deaths which increased from 291 to 326 deaths (12.0% increase)[1].

- Fatal crashes

Road crashes are a leading cause of death and hospitalised injuries in Australia. It's important to understand their underlying factors, especially crashes that result in at least one fatality.

- Single and Multiple Vehicle Crashes

Most fatal crashes involve a single vehicle, totalling 711 crashes in the 12 months ending January 2025, 58.6% of all fatal crashes. There were 503 fatal crashes involving multiple vehicles (9.1% increase from previous year)[1].

There have been 26 more fatal single-vehicle crashes (3.8% increase) compared to the 12 months ending January 2024[1].

In summary, the increases across the states and across the subgroups listed above are not sustainable.

The annual average in year-on-year increases has been 4.6%. If this average trend was to continue, it would mean the nation's road fatalities for 2025 would be 1,360 and would reach 1,556 in 2028[1].

Has the Time for the Next Paradigm Arrived

Cultural paradigms determine both how we view road safety and the actions we take to improve it. - Finding the next cultural paradigm for road safety Lawrence P. Lonero[3]

In his paper, Lonero suggested that the dominant cultural paradigm for road safety in North America has been one set in place in the 1960s. It is based on two key assumptions.

First is the ability of federal technology-forcing regulation to require automobile manufacturers and highway authorities to continuously improve the protection of vehicle occupants.

This would also extend to road engineering and safety standards.

The second key assumption is that prevention of crashes is impossible, at least as it is attempted through influencing how hundreds of millions of people choose to drive. This is focused to a large degree on enforcement changing behaviour.

It could be argued that Australia has also used the same model since 1970 and that these changes only became possible to the socially unacceptable numbers of road crashes and fatalities.

And, while this approach has historically been successful to a point, we now need to create a new level of urgency to engage the same level of change and commitment that we experienced in the 1970's.

The current upward trends in road trauma may be the catalyst for the next paradigm shift in road safety. But one critical question is, how many lives will be lost before we reach this new level of unacceptability?

How do we get road safety back on a road to improvement and sustainability?

It could be argued that the progressive downward trends in road fatalities since the 1970's have created a paradigm.

This paradigm in road safety is driven by a number of factors around the Safe System approach.

The Safe System approach is typically defined by its four pillars, including safer roads, safer vehicles, safer speeds, and safer road users[4].

This resulted in a shift away from road user blame towards more systematic approaches to mitigating road traffic injury. In other words, focusing on the assumption that road users will make mistakes, and the road and vehicle engineers should develop countermeasures to the inevitability that human mistakes will happen.

There is a big difference to a mistake and practiced bad habits, ignorance and apathy.

Also, according to Picton and Bueren, “A little over third of the community have no awareness or knowledge of the concept of a Safe System”.

In addition, despite an increasing concern with human behaviour and psychological factors, recent approaches in many developed countries continue to remain focused on infrastructure-based measures, referring to national implementation strategies.

Have we outsourced responsibility? Have we, through our engineering focus, disempowered the community and the individual?

Community engagement is seen as a prerequisite of sustainable development. Exploring community perceptions, needs, and aspirations is seen as the first step towards defining appropriate and acceptable planning outcomes.

While there is an increasing trend of promoting community engagement by the state agencies in designing road safety strategies, detailed policy directions are often lacking.

Influence is a key factor in the social model approach. This means each individual and organisation leverage their tools and influence to generate outcomes that result in broader road safety awareness and benefits.

In his 2017 paper, "The Future of Road Safety: A Worldwide Perspective," Professor Fred Wegman highlighted that the future of road safety remains uncertain. Since its publication, this uncertainty has only grown due to social changes and an increase in road trauma following the Covid-19 pandemic[5].

Clearly the current upward trends in road fatalities indicates a level of concern and the need to explore new models for road safety.

Road safety is not just a transport issue or a government responsibility—it is a shared concern that spans multiple sectors, including health, social services, law enforcement, education, justice, urban planning, and industry. It also intersects with everyday life, as every individual is a road user in some capacity.

To create lasting change in road trauma, a long-term cultural shift is essential. Road safety must become ‘business as usual’ for all local and state road authorities while fostering a broader culture of safety across Australian society.

Achieving this requires a shift from traditional approaches to a social model of road safety, where influence plays a central role in driving meaningful change.

Understanding the Social Model

At the core of the social model is the recognition that individuals do not act in isolation—their behaviours are shaped by their environment, background, and the cultural norms surrounding them[6].

The model consists of five interconnected layers, with the individual at the centre. These layers are:

- System/Public Policy Approach
- Community Approach
- Organisational Approach
- Interpersonal Functions
- Individual Functions

Rather than relying solely on personal knowledge and skills, the social model acknowledges that what influences one person may not resonate with another.

By expanding the responsibility for road safety beyond the individual, the model encourages positive influence at multiple levels—between individuals, within organisations, and across the broader networks and institutions they interact with.

This collective approach strengthens the ability to shape safer behaviours and attitudes, ultimately driving a cultural shift toward safer roads for all.

As part of this model, the federal government launched a new national campaign in December 2024[7].

The campaign titled Safe Driving Starts with You – don't let the car change who you are, was designed around some market research[8]. The research showed:

- It is important to present safety messages in a way that acknowledges the role that everyone has and that avoids perceptions of a 'typical' government voice.
- Most believe they are safe drivers, therefore road safety messages can be deemed as for 'others' and references to 'driving safely' can unintentionally reinforce existing unsafe behaviours.
- Statistics about death or serious injury ('the road toll') are heard but not deeply felt due to a weak link to personal attitudes and behaviours.
- Driving is strongly perceived to be a private / individual activity - not a community activity with a shared safety agenda and burden of risks.
- How we act as individualistic drivers can conflict with our values, although currently this feeling is very latent.

However, despite being listed as a key model in the current National Road Safety Strategy, little appears to be happening in this area at the time of writing, apart from this advertising campaign.

Whilst this research and the campaign itself is a positive step, it does still have a traditional “government feel” and potentially retains the perceptions of a ‘typical’ government voice.

In addition to this campaign, the federal government should be encouraged to work with the NGO Road Safety sector to expand on the implementation of this model to current road safety activities.

Additional Trend Variations

There is also another interesting factor that seems to be counter to the long-held view that road trauma reduces in difficult economic times.

Previous studies that have investigated the relationship between economic performance and safety for different groups of the population find that the reductions in traffic fatalities during economic downturns tend to be largest among young people[9].

The research indicates three main mechanisms favourable to road safety during downturns:

- Economic downturns are associated with less growth in traffic or a decline in traffic volumes.
- Economic downturns are associated with a disproportionate reduction in the exposure of high-risk groups in traffic; in particular unemployment tends to be higher among young people than people in other age groups.
- Reductions in disposable income may be associated with more cautious road user behaviour, such as less drinking and driving, lower speed to save fuel, fewer holiday trips.
- In December, Australia extended its current record-long ‘per capita recession’ to seven straight quarters[10].

When considering this alongside the cost-of-living crisis, one would typically expect a decrease in road trauma; however, the contrary appears to be happening.

This is an area that could benefit from further research to investigate why this long held connection between road safety gains and economic downturns are not currently being experienced.

Summary and Conclusions

The findings of this report highlight the urgent need for a multi-faceted approach to road safety in Australia.

A change in strategy is needed to reverse the increasing trends in road trauma. It is evident that the existing methods are not yielding better outcomes for road safety, and without a shift, the national road safety goals for 2030 will remain unattainable given the current trends and statistics.

While vehicle safety technologies and infrastructure improvements have contributed to reducing some types of road trauma, challenges remain, particularly for vulnerable road users and in regional areas.

A key takeaway from this report is the changing nature of road risks post-pandemic. The shift towards active transport, remote working, and increased regional travel has altered road safety dynamics.

Addressing these changes requires adaptive policies, targeted education programs, and enhanced enforcement strategies.

Moreover, the report underscores the importance of a proactive, data-driven approach to road safety. Increased investment in research and real-time data collection will be essential for understanding emerging risks and implementing effective countermeasures.

What is also clear is that there is a lack of current research that looks at the social and cultural impacts on road safety post the Covid-19 pandemic. There has certainly been a change in road safety performance since 2020, but there a appears to be little research on the aspect.

A paper from 2019 titled Bad behaviour or societal failure? Perceptions of the factors contributing to drivers' engagement in the fatal five driving behaviours looked at this issue prior to the pandemic[11].

At the time, this study reinforced the growing consensus that road trauma results from a complex interplay of factors across all levels of the road transport system. The findings highlight a diverse range of influences that may contribute to drivers engaging in the Fatal Five behaviours, which are directly linked to road crashes.

While many of these factors exist within the transport system itself, broader societal issues also play a significant role in shaping driver behaviour.

Certainly, further research would be needed to explore the interplay of culture, attitudes and social norms on road safety and individual road user performance.

Collaboration between government agencies, private sector stakeholders, and community organisations will also be crucial in developing sustainable and impactful road safety initiatives.

In conclusion, while progress has been made in improving road safety in Australia, the increasing trends in road trauma are a major concern. The situation is unacceptable and there remains much work to be done.

A focus on vulnerable road users, human factors, and road user education will be pivotal in reducing road trauma.

By prioritising innovation, community engagement, and evidence-based interventions, Australia can move towards a safer road environment for all users.

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