Australian Road Safety Foundation

Suite 13, 3990 Pacific Highway,
Loganholme QLD 4129
P: 1300 723 843

An Overview of Road Toll Trends and the Potential Impacts of the Fuel Crisis

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Introduction

Sadly, road trauma remains a major public health, economic and social challenge in Australia. Yet, the level of action on the increasing numbers of fatalities and the impacts of road crashes appears to still be a very low priority on both the political and public agendas.

The country has been experiencing increasing levels of road fatalities since 2020 and that trend has continued during the start of 2026.

At the time of writing, the first two months of the year saw a total of 210 lives lost nationally. This compares to 191 in 2025 and 203 in 2024.

For the 12 months ending February 2026, the national road fatality rate was 4.8 deaths per 100,000 people. This rate is 2.9% higher than the same time last year.

Also, for the 12-month period ending February 2026, the states that experienced the most road deaths were New South Wales with 377 (20.1% increase on previous 12 months), followed by Queensland with 317 (8.2% increase).

So far in 2026, the greatest number of deaths have occurred in New South Wales with 58 (45.0% increase), followed by Queensland with 50 deaths (25.0% increase). https://datahub.roadsafety.gov.au/

One thing is certain, Australia is not on track to meet the National Road Safety Strategy target of a 50% reduction in deaths by 2030.

To add further complexity in the road safety environment, currently the nation and the world, is facing a fuel crisis due to the war in the Middle East. The crisis has the potential to disrupt road use and transport, the likes of which we have potentially not seen since the 1970's.

It is unclear how long or how widespread the impacts of this crisis could be. But it is likely to have an impact on road use, traffic volumes and road trauma.

The extent of these changes is hard to identify, but it likely to have positive and negative influence with different road user groups.

Short Term Road Safety Impacts of the Fuel Crisis

In the short term (next 6–12 months), the fuel crisis may have mixed effects on road safety outcomes:

- Reduced discretionary travel due to high fuel prices may temporarily lower traffic volumes, potentially reducing crash exposure in urban areas;
- Conversely, economic stress on drivers and operators may increase risk taking behaviours such as speeding, longer shifts for heavy vehicle drivers, reduced maintenance, and fatigue related crashes;
- Growth in motorcycles, smaller vehicles or informal transport as cost saving measures may increase the exposure of higher risk road users.

Medium Term Road Safety Implications

Over the medium term (2–5 years), the fuel crisis may influence road safety more structurally:

- Delayed vehicle fleet renewal, as households postpone purchasing newer, safer vehicles, leading to persistently higher trauma severity;
- Increased freight task concentration, with fewer operators doing more kilometres, intensifying exposure for heavy vehicles and regional roads;
- Accelerated policy focus on transport electrification, modal shift and fuel efficiency, which if well managed, could support safety through lower vehicle kilometres travelled and safer vehicle technologies.

The aim of this paper is to explore what those impacts might be and provide some commentary for the Australian Road Safety Foundation to consider for its ongoing advocacy efforts, campaigns and media opportunities.

Higher Fuel Prices, the Fuel Crisis and Road Safety: A Double-Edged Sword

The recent global conflicts have seen an escalation in fuel prices and growing concerns about fuel security. Apart from the Covid-19 era, this situation represents one of the most significant transport policy challenges Australia has faced in decades. While the economic and social consequences for higher fuel and transport costs are immediately visible, the implications for road safety are more complex and, in some cases, counterintuitive.

Even with the recently announced reduction in the fuel excise for the next 3 months, (Lowering it from 52.6 cents per litre (CPL) to 26.3 CPL. The reduced rate lasts for three

months, effective from Wednesday, March 30, until June 30, 2026.) higher fuel prices and fuel supply disruptions have the potential to both reduce and escalate road trauma, depending on how individuals, community, industry and governments respond.

https://www.pm.gov.au/media/fuel-excise-halved-three-month

Cost of living may provide a subtle way to imbed driver performance and safety at the same time as discussing fuel efficiency.

Potential Positive Impacts on Road Safety

In the short term, rising fuel prices can lead to a reduction in discretionary travel. As households seek to limit costs, non-essential trips are often deferred or consolidated, resulting in lower traffic volumes. This could particularly be the case in metropolitan areas or at peak holiday times such as Easter.

Reduced exposure on the road network can translate into fewer crashes, especially those associated with peak-hour congestion and short urban trips. However, as we saw during Covid, fewer vehicles on the road doesn't automatically translate to fewer crashes or better road safety outcomes.

Higher fuel costs may also encourage more fuel-efficient driving behaviours as drivers and riders become more conscious about fuel use.

Drivers seeking to minimise consumption may adopt smoother acceleration, lower cruising speeds and better trip planning. These behaviours align closely with safer driving practices and can reduce both crash risk and severity.

Previous research has suggested that for every 10 percent increase in fuel prices, there could be a 2.6 percent and 2.2 percent reduction in fatalities for petrol and diesel models, respectively. Although some studies have suggested this could be as high as a 6% per reduction. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/ecin.12171

Similarly, total collisions fall by 1.4 percent for petrol and 1.2 for diesel models, and total casualties fall by 1.6 percent for petrol and 1.4 percent for diesel with every 10 percent rise in fuel price. These results could be due to drivers reducing speed to achieve better fuel efficiency and to people driving less to save money – in particular younger, riskier drivers – hence reducing exposure.
https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0001457523002439

The fuel crisis may also accelerate modal shift in some contexts. Increased use of public transport, car-pooling and active transport has the potential to reduce overall vehicle kilometres travelled. If supported by community campaigns, safer infrastructure and appropriate policy settings, this shift could contribute to long-term road safety gains, particularly in dense urban environments.

Finally, sustained fuel price pressure could strengthen the case for broader transport reform, including electrification, improved fuel efficiency standards and smarter land-use planning.

Over time, these structural changes may deliver safer vehicles, lower speed environments and an improved road safety culture.

Negative and Heightened Risks

Against these potential benefits, however, are a series of significant road safety risks that may outweigh shorter term gains if left unaddressed.

Economic stress is a critical factor. As fuel costs rise, drivers, particularly those in regional and remote areas with limited travel alternatives, may respond by cutting spending on vehicle maintenance, delaying tyre replacement or postponing essential safety repairs.

Older, less safe vehicles may remain in service for longer, increasing the severity of crashes when they occur.

In the freight and logistics sector, the impacts may be more acute. Fuel represents one of the largest operating costs for heavy vehicle operators. Price shocks and supply insecurity can drive longer working hours, tighter delivery schedules and higher levels of fatigue.

Combined with reduced capacity for vehicle maintenance or training, as well as emotion stresses on heavy vehicle drivers, creates elevated risk on highways and regional roads, where crash outcomes are already more severe.

There is also a risk of increased use of higher-risk transport modes. Motorcycles and smaller vehicles such as e-bikes, bicycles, and scooters may appear more affordable in high-fuel-price environments, but these users face disproportionately higher fatality and injury rates.

Higher fuel prices may encourage substitution from cars to motorcycles due to their superior fuel economy, placing upward pressure on the number of motorcyclist deaths.

Without corresponding investment in protective infrastructure and enforcement, such shifts can increase the share of vulnerable road users in the trauma statistics.

Fuel shortages may further disrupt emergency services, enforcement operations and road maintenance activities, particularly outside major cities. Any reduction in visible policing, fatigue enforcement or infrastructure upkeep undermines the safety system at a time when risks are amplifying.

Distributional and Equity Impacts

The road safety impacts of the fuel crisis will not be evenly distributed. Regional communities, lower-income households and transport-dependent workers are likely to face the greatest burden.

These groups typically travel longer distances, rely more heavily on private vehicles and have fewer alternatives available. As a result, they may absorb higher risk while having the least capacity to manage it.

An Opportunity for a Road Safety Narrative

It could be argued that driving in a manner that results in lower fuel consumption is not often consciously considered by the general public.

Having said that, the current situation does offer the potential of promoting additional motivations to drive more safely by subtlety focusing on the financial benefits of achieving better fuel economy and reduced running costs.

Research also suggests that there is also the potential to build partnerships with government to provide an integrated message about the benefits of better driving. With the aim of a cultural shift to improve safety and reduce cost.

https://www.monash.edu/ data/assets/pdf_file/0003/217308/The-relationship-between-fuel-economy-and-safety-outcomes.pdf

Turning the Fuel Crisis into a Road Safety Campaign Opportunity

The fuel crisis creates a rare alignment between public concern, financial pressure and behaviour change. At times of rising fuel costs, drivers are more receptive to messages about:

- how they drive;
- how much they drive; and
- how much that driving costs them.

Critically, the same behaviours that save fuel also reduce crash risk. This allows the ARSF to position safer driving not as an abstract or moral obligation, but as a practical, cost-saving action that provides multiple benefits.

This context provides fertile ground for a campaign that:

- reinforces safer driving behaviours;
- improves fuel efficiency;
- reduces emissions; and
- lowers road trauma.

The issue of fuel pricing is already dominating headlines and there is a strong risk that the road trauma issue will be crowded out of the media's attention. This campaign reframes safety as part of the fuel conversation.

The fuel crisis acts as a stress test and the slightly different pathway for a road safety narrative.

By creating a new campaign, the ARSF can:

- Keep road safety visible during a competing crisis;
- Shape behavioural change while motivation is high;
- Lock in safer norms that persist beyond the fuel shock.

The fuel crisis should be used to reinforce the behaviours that save fuel, save money and save lives. The ARSF is well placed to lead this conversation by demonstrating that safer driving is not only responsible, it is economical, realistic and achievable for every road user.

Conclusion

Higher fuel prices and fuel supply instability present a paradox for road safety. While they may reduce travel volumes and encourage safer driving behaviours in the short term, the longer-term risks associated with economic stress, delayed vehicle renewal, freight pressures and vulnerable road users are substantial.

Driving behaviours that reduce fuel consumption also deliver clear road safety benefits.

Linking safer driving with improved fuel efficiency offers a valuable opportunity

to incentivise behavioural change by emphasising clear financial gains. The aim would be to use this opportunity to instil better behaviours that will continue to be used and change culture in the longer term.

Establishing this connection can provide drivers, fleet owners and professional drivers, with a tangible financial incentive to adopt and reinforce safer driving practices. It also creates scope for stronger partnerships with transport and cost-of-living initiatives, enabling a more integrated and consistent public message about the benefits of better driving.

Ultimately, aligning safety and economic outcomes supports improved wellbeing for individuals and the community as a whole.

Australia's current road safety situation is characterised by an unacceptably high and rising road toll, stagnating performance against national targets, and persistent inequities between urban and regional outcomes.

The emerging fuel crisis adds a new layer of complexity, presenting both potential short-term reductions in travel and longer-term risks linked to economic pressure, freight concentration and delayed safety investment.

However, it does provide a window of opportunity for the ARSF to engage Governments, media and the public to reduce costs and improve road safety performance.

Russell White
Founder and Chair
Australian Road Safety Foundation

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