



Transport

Australia's rising road toll: how the pandemic and a love of big cars are putting lives at risk

Decades of gains in road safety are being set back by the rise in SUV ownership and impatient drivers used to empty lockdown streets

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There were 1,204 deaths on Australian roads in the 12 months to 31 March, an almost 6% increase. Of the total deaths, 557 were drivers, up 2.2%, while 189 were passengers, up 3.8%. Pedestrian deaths increased by 22.6%, rising to 163, while motorcyclist deaths climbed 7% to 246.

The rise in deaths puts Australia further away from meeting targets in the National Road Safety Strategy, which in 2021 set out an ambition of reducing road deaths by 50% by 2030. The target also includes no deaths of children seven years or under.

Prof Stuart Newstead, director of Monash University's Accident Research Centre, said that early indications from research his centre had conducted in Victoria suggested the Covid pandemic was contributing to more road trauma across the country.

He explained that researchers see two broad categories of factors that influence road danger - exposure, which is how much people are driving, and risk, which is driver behaviour, vehicle choice and road design.

Road fatalities from 2013 to 2022

Annual deaths per 100,000 population



During the pandemic travel exposure went down, particularly in cars, by about 70%, while road trauma only dropped by 20%, said Newstead.

“What that shows you is that those people have developed a vastly different approach to risk, that the pandemic fundamentally changed people’s attitudes,” he said.

“That’s partly what happens because when you take traffic off the road, you can speed more easily more often, and with police focused on other things, perhaps people thought they wouldn’t get caught.”

Additionally, he points to something he calls “low-mileage bias”.

“A lot of people, after being locked up and confined for so long, wanted to get out and travel, and people who have driven less lose their skills about how to interact with traffic.”

▲▲ People have less patience with traffic now after the roads were much quieter for years
Prof Stuart Newstead

The pandemic also led many Australians to ditch public transport permanently, whether that be because they can now work from home and have more time to drive for leisure, or because they grew accustomed to the comfort of driving to work during the pandemic. Public transport patronage of about 80% of pre-Covid levels appears to be the new normal in Sydney and Melbourne, according to University of Sydney research.

Another potential cause that is widely observed by academics studying car safety is the strong link between road trauma and the strength of the economy.

“Road trauma tends to increase when there is more economic activity and unemployment is low,” Newstead said. “Not only do you have more goods and people moving around, but people have more money to spend, so they feel some financial security and their fear of fines could be lessened because they have the capacity to pay for it.”

In NSW, data shows the number of mobile digital speed camera fines issued when the speed limit was exceeded by 10km/h or less increased from 3,222 in October 2020 to 27,855 by February 2021, however this coincided with the removal of warning signs.

Newstead said early data for Victoria also showed the level of speeding and running red lights went up significantly.

“People have less patience with traffic now after the roads were much quieter for years.”

More capacity for discretionary travel, and the surge in domestic holidays in recent years, could also be contributing to the increased death toll.

People in regional Australia were almost five times more likely to die in road crashes than those living in cities last year, the latest statistics show.

“The standard of our rural road network is pretty poor, the infrastructure really doesn’t support the speeds people are allowed to drive on them,” Newstead said. “So when people make mistakes, if they drift out of their lane, lapse in concentration or fall asleep, the ramifications are horrific.”

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Then there is vehicle choice. There has been an [enormous surge in popularity of SUVs and four wheel drive utes](#), and transport experts have been [scathing about the tax perks that encourage their uptake](#).

While large SUVs are often safer for occupants, they are much more dangerous to pedestrians and other road users. Studies have found that [children involved in a fatal crash are eight times more likely to have been struck by an SUV](#) than a standard car.

Newstead worked on research in 2020 that found the road death toll was inflated by 5% purely from people choosing to buy four-wheel drive utes and large SUVs despite not needing their power or size for the routes they drive. He says the 5% figure is now considerably higher due to increased sales patterns in the last few years.

📹 The pandemic changed people's attitudes to risk, contributing to a rise in road trauma, Prof Stuart Newstead says.
Photograph: Daniel Pockett/Getty Images

“Our propensity to buy these vehicles is driving road safety backwards, and tax rules have encouraged this because of the ability to hide personal use of vehicles to gain a business tax concession.”

Their size also gives their drivers a sense of security and makes them “much less concerned about others’ safety”, Newstead said, referencing US studies.

Marion Terrill, the director of the Grattan Institute’s transport and cities program, says this phenomenon is known as the “Peltzman effect” - that people are more inclined to behave in a risky way if they feel measures, such as mandatory seatbelt laws or speed limits, are protecting them.

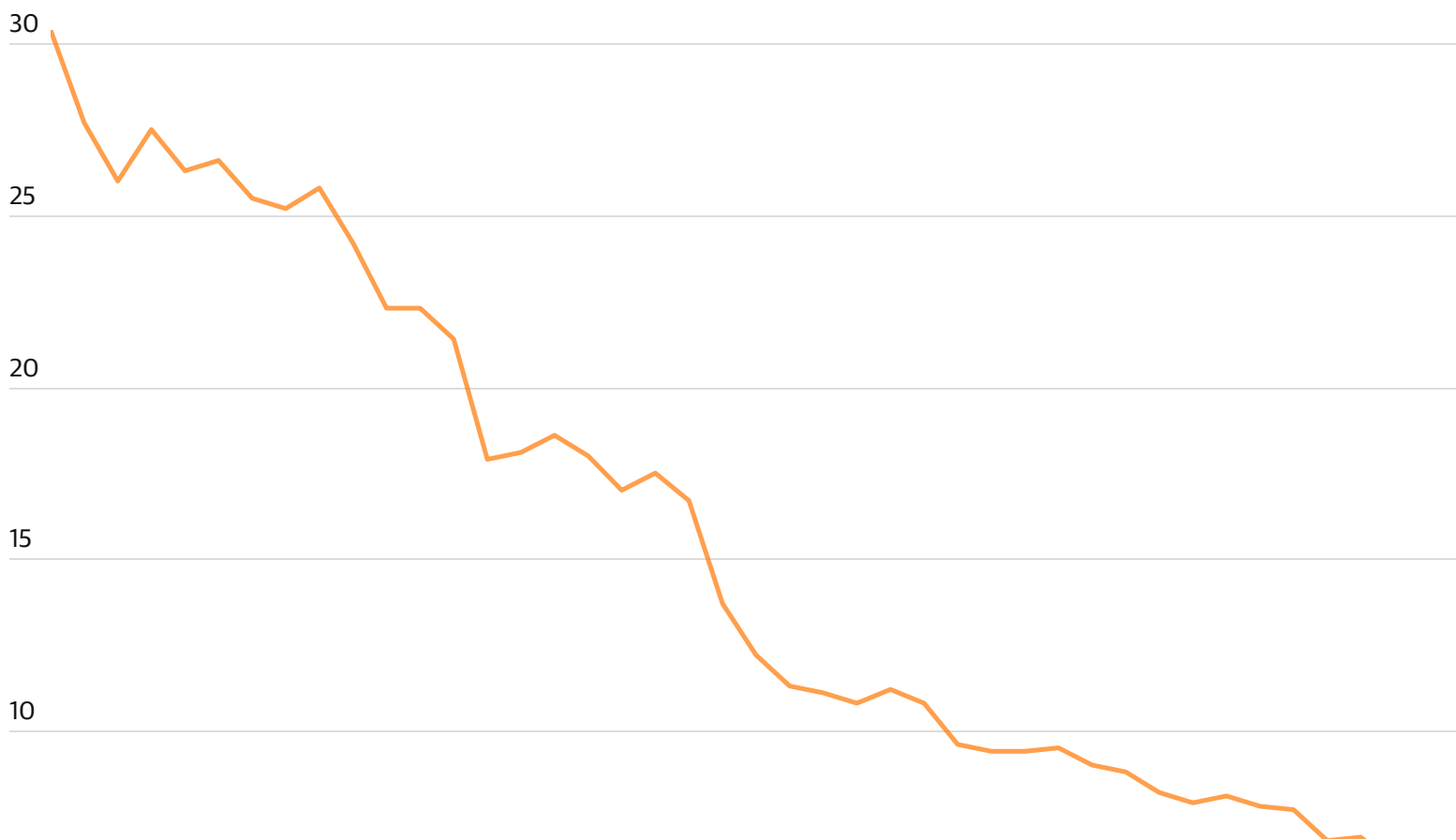
She pointed to Australian data tracking long-term fatalities across roads broken down by their speed limit. Despite a trend in reducing from 60km/h zones to 50km/h, there was no significant decline in the total number of fatalities occurring across the two speed zones.

Terrill said that given the huge strides Australia had made in road safety in recent decades, further progress was always going to be tough.

Road deaths in Australia peaked in 1970 at 30.4 deaths a year per 100,000 population and dropped to historic lows before the pandemic, before rising again in the past five years. They are now at 4.61 deaths a year per 100,000 population. This should be 3.94 deaths, if the country is to reach its 2030 target.

Road fatalities from 1970 to 2012

Annual deaths per 100,000 population



“We’ve had this incredible reduction in road fatalities over 30 years,” Terrill said, mentioning seatbelts, speed and road-rule enforcement, improved vehicle safety technology, as well as better emergency services response times and the ability for people to call them quicker. “It means it’s now quite difficult to make further gains.”

Terrill agrees that the popularity and tax perks surrounding SUVs have made our roads more dangerous, but also points to the exponential [rise in freight truck and heavy vehicle movements that has far outstripped population growth](#).

Referencing the Peltzman effect, Terrill said a possible solution to further reduce road fatalities is to design roads to appear riskier, which would slow down traffic and force users to consider each other. As driving becomes automated and requires less constant attention, it has de-skilled us as drivers, she said.

Terrill said the [“squareabout” designed to reduce deaths in the Netherlands](#) by using odd shapes and little signage to make it ambiguous about whether part of the road was footpath,

and who had right of way, could be considered in Australia.

“Everyone was unsure how to handle it, which made drivers slow down, make eye contact with pedestrians and other drivers, and that interaction makes the risks clear.”

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