

The National SaferRoads Project: placing road safety on the political map

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Introduction

The national *SaferRoads* project is a partnership of the Australian Automobile Association (AAA), the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA), the Australian Trucking Association (ATA) and the Australasian College of Road Safety (ACRS). Together, these organisations represent the majority of road users in Australia.

These organisations established the *SaferRoads* project for three key reasons. First, with an average of five people killed and more than 60 seriously injured on Australian roads every day, road trauma continues to be a significant social problem, which the partners believe needs be addressed. Second, during the past seven years, the rate of improvement in the numbers of people killed on the road appears to have slowed, and there is some suggestion that the numbers of injuries could be increasing. Hence there is a need to 'make a greater effort' if we are continue the improvements of the past. In this respect, the National Road Safety Strategy (NRSS), which aims to reduce the fatality rate by 40 per cent by 2010, provides a very useful policy framework. The *SaferRoads* project is designed to support the NRSS.

Third, research by the AAA shows that motorists are quite apathetic about the issue of road safety. More specifically, motorists vastly underestimate the true extent of the road safety problem, and have a very narrow understanding of the ways in which safety might be improved. This topic is elaborated on in the first section of this paper, and is linked to an aim of *SaferRoads*, which is to raise the profile of road safety in the community and with decision makers.

The second section of this paper introduces the Australian Road Assessment Program (AusRAP). AusRAP is an initiative being pursued by the AAA and its member clubs as a means of highlighting the true extent of the road safety problem, and filling the 'missing link' in motorists' understanding of road safety issues.

Motorists' attitudes towards road safety

The AAA undertakes regular surveys of motorists' attitudes and priorities on a range of issues including mobility and the car, driver behaviour and safety, roads, petrol, and the environment. ANOP Research Services, on behalf of the AAA, conducted the most recent of these general surveys in 2003. This was the sixth survey that the AAA has conducted since 1995, and measured the attitudes of 1,643 motorists who were over the age of 18 and both members and non-members of AAA's constituent clubs. Sample sizes in each state were weighted according to relative populations.

The second survey referenced to in this paper was also conducted by ANOP on behalf of AAA, and was completed in July 2004. It focused specifically on motorists' attitudes to road safety, and involved 1,725 motorists who were over the age of 18 and both members and non-members of AAA's constituent clubs. Again, sample sizes in each state were weighted according to relative populations.

In both cases, these quantitative surveys were preceded by a series of qualitative 'focus group' surveys. Full results of the surveys can be obtained from the AAA website, www.aaa.asn.au. The discussion in this section of the paper draws on the results of these two rounds of qualitative and quantitative research.

"Other" drivers are the problem

The most significant finding of the general survey of motorists' attitudes in 2003 was an unusual one. For the first time since 1995, the behaviour of "other" drivers was clearly the issue most on motorists' minds. Of those surveyed, 37 per cent said the behaviour of "other" drivers was their most important motoring issue, compared to 28 per cent who said "motoring costs", 18 per cent who said "safety", 16 per cent who said the "condition of roads" and 14 per cent who said the "condition of roads". In the past, the cost of motoring has clearly been the issue of most importance to motorists.

While this result might be unusual, it is perhaps to be expected. In the 2003 focus groups, it was found that many motorists perceive that demographic, lifestyle and suburban development trends are leading to increased social pressures. This perception is manifest in two key ways. First, reliance on the car is higher than ever: the proportion of people who report using their car daily has jumped by 15 per cent in the past eight years from 55 per cent in 1995 to 70 percent in 2003. Second, people feel that there has been a decrease in emphasis on politeness and courtesy in society. Hence, as motorists are in their cars more often, and feel they are living (and driving) in a less tolerant world, it is perhaps not surprising that the behaviour of "other" drivers is of concern.

In terms of road safety, this is a significant finding. In the second round of focus groups and the survey in 2004, which explored this concern about "other" drivers in terms of road safety, it was found that such is the importance of driver attitudes and behaviour as an emerging agenda item, that motorists cite this factor as of equal importance to the

ubiquitous enforcement and policing response in answer to what would encourage safer driving. Although of perhaps even greater significance is that first, there appears to be an increasingly apathetic attitude towards road safety among motorists, and second, there is a relative absence of safer roads and better infrastructure in perceptions about road safety. This represents a major discrepancy between reality and community perception.

Motorists have become inured to the road toll

The rise to prominence of motorists' concern about "other" drivers has coincided with a general lowering of concern about road safety. In 1995, 94 per cent of motorists said that on scale of 1 to 7 (1 being least concerned and 7 being most concerned), they rated their level of concern about road safety at between 5 and 7. By 2003, this number had reduced to 72 per cent, representing a 22 per cent decline.

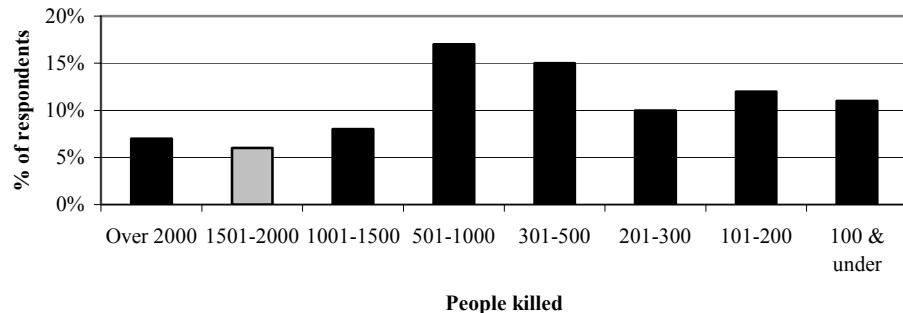
It seems that this finding runs contrary to actual road safety performance nationally. If the number of people killed and injured on the roads had declined noticeably between 1995 and 2003, then it could perhaps be expected that there would be a decline in people's level of concern as well. During that period though, the national road toll remained relatively static at around 1,700 deaths each year, and there is evidence to suggest that the number of injuries sustained annually actually increased.¹

The qualitative research in 2004 indicated that this decline in concern about road safety is partly a result of motorists' belief that road crashes as a 'part of life'. Significantly, this is despite the fact that 8 out of 10 respondents in the 2004 survey reported that they had at some stage, been involved in a crash. Nevertheless, the risk of having a crash has become acceptable to most motorists because they balance this risk against the enormous benefits of flexible, quick and reasonably inexpensive car travel. This tends to be reinforced by numerous characteristics of modern society, including the reporting of road safety in the media, which is often impersonal: during holiday periods the road toll is announced on the nightly news alongside the regular economics report and weather report. Road crashes have become a part of daily radio traffic announcements, where there is emphasis on the annoyance of potential delays, as opposed to the personal and social consequences of crashes.

While this weighing up of risk might be a rational behaviour of 'consumers' of road transport, it is problematic because motorists' understanding of the true social and economic impacts of road crashes is not well developed, hence skewing their perception of 'risk'. The degree to which motorists' underestimate the road safety problem is illustrated in Figure 1. It shows that nearly three-quarters of motorists underestimate the number of people killed on Australian roads, with more than a third believing the number is less than 300—substantially less than the actual 2003 result of 1,628. The median result was only 500.

¹ Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB), Fatal Road Crash Database ; NSW Roads and Traffic Authority (RTA), 2002. Road Traffic Accidents in NSW – 2001. Statistical Statement: Year Ended 31 December 2001.

Figure 1 How many people were killed on Australian roads in 2003?



14 per cent of respondents were unable to give an estimation of the road toll.

Hence, many motorists appear to have become inured to the road toll, and most vastly underestimate the extent of the road safety problem. That isn't to say however, that motorists don't see road safety as an issue—they do. Road safety tends to become important when there are particularly devastating crashes reported in the media, or when specific issues are being debated publicly. At time of writing this paper for example, a road crash in Western Australia, which involved young drivers and resulted in the deaths of four people, prompted a great deal of public engagement and debate about the need for nighttime curfews. Road safety also tends to be a relatively important issue for the community at the Local Government level, where for example, in Rockdale in Southern Sydney, the local council has found that in its regular community surveys, roads and traffic issues are of greatest concern to residents. In 2002, 49.1 per cent of respondents said that this was the "Council news item of most interest to them."² Given the ubiquitous nature of the road system, it is perhaps not surprising that people show concern about the local roads they drive, walk or cycle on every day.

However, in the broader public policy context, and at the State and Federal Government levels, road safety is certainly not a 'hot button' item for motorists.

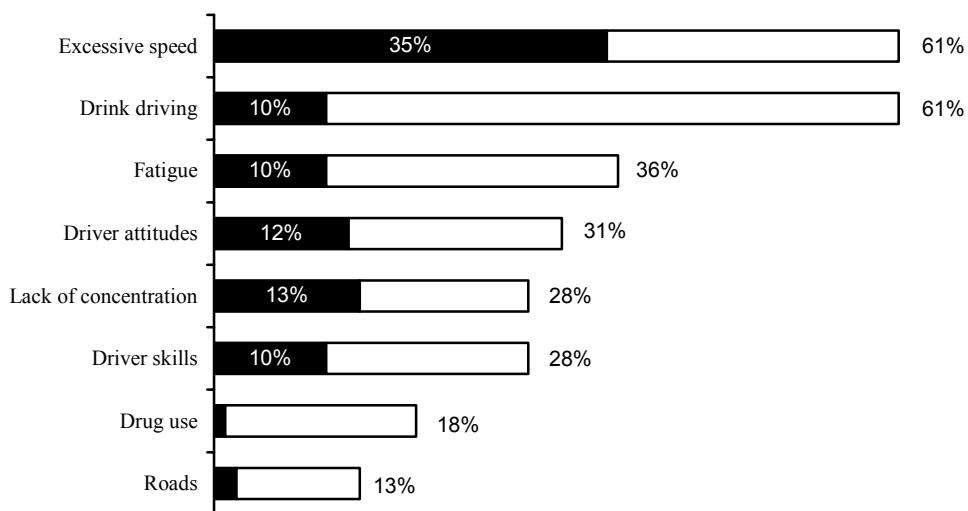
² Rockdale City Council - www.rockdale.nsw.gov.au

Drivers cause crashes

While motorists might be becoming inured to the road toll, their beliefs about how it could be improved appear to have become increasingly narrow. Consistent with the earlier discussion, the main focus of motorists' attitudes to road safety is on how people drive, rather than on road or car safety. The emphasis is on individual responsibility, with the role of government largely seen as the encouragement and enforcement of safer driver behaviour.

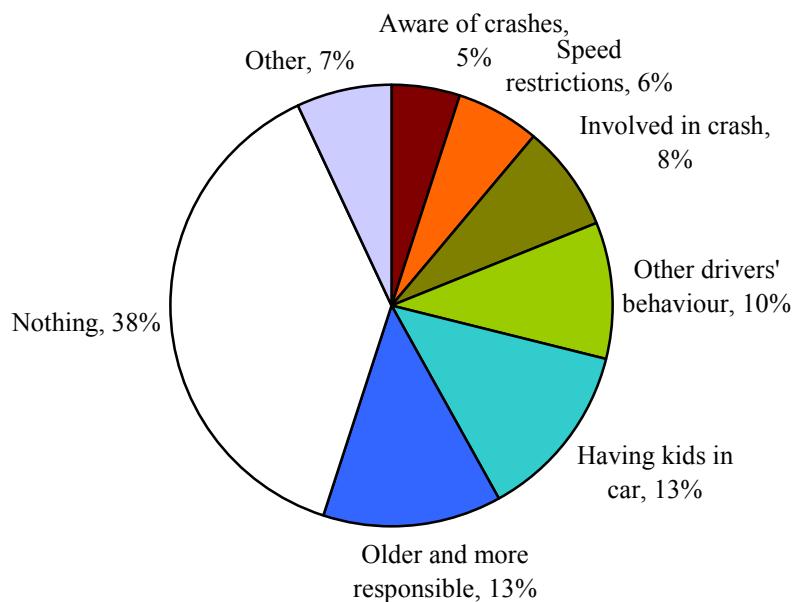
This focus on driver behaviour was demonstrated when motorists were asked the open-ended question: "what causes road crashes?" Without fail, respondents listed a behavioural issue as one of their three most important issues when it comes to the cause of road crashes. Figure 2 shows that 35 percent of respondents listed "excessive speed" as their most important issue and that 61 per cent of respondents listed "excessive speed" as one of their three most important issues. A mere two percent of respondents listed "roads" as their most important issue, and 13 per cent listed "roads" as one of their three most important issues.

Figure 2 What causes road crashes?



In combination with this strong belief in the behavioural issues, the community is convinced that, more than ever, it is "other" drivers who pose who pose the real problem. Nearly half the motorists surveyed by AAA believe that Australians are driving more dangerously now than they were 10 years ago. The strength of this belief that road safety is problem for someone else is illustrated in the results shown in Figure 3. It shows that while 62 per cent of motorists say that things like "speed restrictions", "being more aware of crashes", "having kids in the car" and "the behaviour of other drivers" effects the way they drive, a significant proportion—38 per cent—of motorists say that there is nothing that has changed the way that they drive.

Figure 3 What has made you drive differently?



Other includes: More traffic, TV advertising, and family or friend involved in crash.

That is, despite the fact that motorists are well versed in the behavioural issues that can cause road crashes, a large number of them don't see themselves as needing to take heed of those issues.

To deal with the perceived dangerous behaviour of other drivers, a "crackdown on aggressive drivers" is seen as the most important way to achieve safer driving. However, in an ironic twist, the community says that the "newer" methods of enforcement are going too far. Nearly 2 in 3 drivers have reservations about "variable speed limits" (mainly because they are seen to be ineffective and confusing) and about "speed/red light cameras" (again mainly because of perceived ineffectiveness and a cynical view of their success in revenue raising). The implication of these results appears to be that, while "other" drivers are seen as the cause of road accidents, enforcement procedures are increasingly seen as tough enough now, with a degree of cynicism about "new" enforcement devices.

In terms of policy, considering the extensive efforts that have been made to inform motorists about the behavioural aspects of road safety through media advertising and education, it is perhaps not surprising that motorists have a well-developed awareness of these issues. If this was the intent of this advertising and educational effort, then it appears to have been successful.

However, it is apparent that this effort is having only a limited impact in actually changing the behaviour of motorists, and has resulted in only a limited engagement by the community in road safety issues. Additionally, it seems that while motorists have a

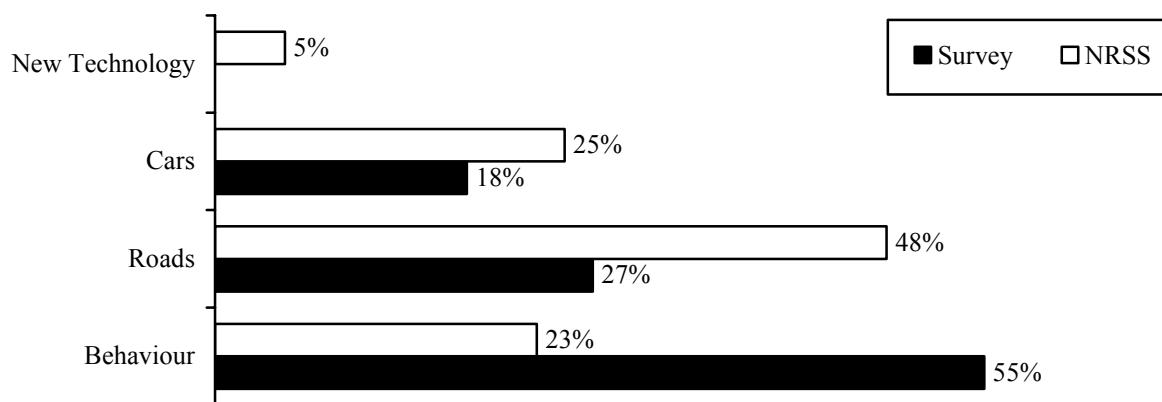
very well developed understanding of the behavioural issues and, while not discussed in this paper specifically, they have a reasonably well developed understanding of vehicle safety issues, motorists' clearly lack an awareness about the role road infrastructure plays in road safety.

Roads – the missing link in the equation

The degree to which motorists underestimate the value of road infrastructure compared to improving the behaviour of drivers is illustrated in Figure 4. It shows the proportion of respondents who rated either "cars", "roads" or "behaviour" as the area in which improvements would be most beneficial in saving lives and avoiding injuries (black bars). 18 per cent of respondents said that making cars safer was most important, while 27 per cent said that improving road infrastructure was most important, and 55 per cent said that improving driver behaviour, through driver education and training and tougher enforcement, was most important.

Overlaid with these results in Figure 4 are the results of research published in the National Road Safety Strategy (NRSS) (white bars). The NRSS has established four key strategic objective areas that could contribute to the target of a reduction of 40 per cent in the fatality rate by 2010. The Strategy says that of the 40 per cent saving, 48 per cent, or nearly half, could be achieved by improving road infrastructure, 25 per cent by safer cars, 23 per cent improved behaviour and 5 per cent through new technology (it is noted that a question on 'new technology' was not asked in the survey).

Figure 4 Motorists' beliefs about "ways to prevent deaths and injuries" versus the National Road Safety Strategy key objective areas.



What the results in Figure 4 demonstrate is a distinct contrast between what motorists believe and the 'reality', as portrayed in the NRSS. As was discussed earlier, motorists' emphasis is on individual responsibility, with the role of government largely seen as the encouragement and enforcement of safer driver behaviour—and not as 'road builders'.

The limited importance that motorists place on "roads" in road safety is matched by their limited knowledge of what can actually be done to make roads safer. For motorists, the dangerous aspects of roads today are not the "bigger picture" aspects of design or specialist features, but rather the "small picture" realities of potholes or uneven surfaces. There is little appreciation of the way in which roads treatments, like sealing shoulders and placing guardrails around trees and poles, can make a road environment "forgiving". There is an important caveat to this finding however. And that is, that when *prompted* about specific ways to make roads safer, the design elements do come more to the fore. "Divided highways", "shoulders" and "line markings" all attract 70 per cent plus importance ratings when prompted. This suggests that a communications effort, which focuses on the road related aspects of road safety, could assist in broadening motorists' understanding of road safety issues.

The need for SaferRoads

The term "poll-driven" politics has been used by many political commentators during recent decades to describe what is perceived to be a growing reliance by policy makers on community attitudes in developing policy.³ While it would be far from true to say that all policy is created on the basis of opinion polls, it is true to say that polling is inexorably a part of contemporary politics. As Don Watson recently wrote of politicians, "all who aspire to the leadership these days have at least one belief, and they have it in common. They believe in the polling".⁴ In the highly competitive world of public policy, the reality

³ See for example Latham, M. (2000), "Putting our Voice Back into Politics", *The Daily Telegraph*, 12 May 2000; Crawford, W. (2000), "Polls Have Taken Control of Pollies", *The Mercury*, 8 April 2000; Goot, M. (2000), "The Prime Minister", *The Bulletin*, 14 March 2000.

⁴ Watson, D. (2003), "Nothing to Declare", *The Bulletin*, 29 July 2003.

is that while the “merits” of an issue might make it worthy of the decision makers’ attention, it must also have community support if it is to gain momentum.

For the partners of the *SaferRoads* project, the case is clear. Roads represent a missing link in the motorists’ understanding about road safety, which in itself is a flagging issue. While road safety undoubtedly deserves a strong commitment from governments on its merits, realistically it has only limited community support and therefore little impetus to drive ongoing and significant improvements in the road toll. There is a need to create an “authorising environment” in which politicians recognise the importance of road safety as a political issue, and feel “authorised” by the community to spend money on improving road safety.

An important way to do this is to ensure that the community is well informed about the extent of the road safety problem, and has an understanding of the broader issues involved. As part of the *SaferRoads* project, one of the specific initiatives that the AAA is pursuing to achieve this aim is the Australian Road Assessment Program (AusRAP), which is briefly discussed below. Importantly, in attempting to broaden motorists’ understanding of road safety issues, the *SaferRoads* partners recognise the need to reinforce motorists’ existing awareness of behavioural and vehicle related aspects of road safety, through the Australian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP), for example.

Australian Road Assessment Program (AusRAP)

AusRAP is a sister program to the Australian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP), which crash-tests new cars and awards them stars for safety. AusRAP is based on the European equivalent, EuroRAP which produces maps showing the risk of road crashes that cause deaths and life-threatening injuries and awards star ratings to roads for safety. It highlights improvements that could be made to roads to reduce the likelihood of crashes—and to make those that do happen survivable.

While there are currently reasonably objective and accepted measures of what constitutes a safe road user—essentially someone who obeys the law; and a safe vehicle—one which rates well under ANCAP, there is no equivalent measure of what constitutes a safe road. AusRAP is designed to fill this gap, and hence connect the ‘missing link’ in motorists’ understanding of road safety issues. It will help to raise awareness about the importance of safe roads and of the need for well-targeted investment.

AusRAP has two standard protocols—Risk Mapping and star rating of roads through the Road Protection Score (RPS). The Risk Mapping process employs historical crash and traffic flow data, to illustrate a road’s safety performance by measuring and mapping the number of casualty crashes along a route. Roads are colour coded according to their relative risk. The second protocol, RPS, involves a “drive through” inspection in specially equipped vehicles that capture video images of the roads. From this information, inspectors assess each road and assign star ratings based on major safety features and hazards.

By giving roads across Australia a safety rating, AusRAP will make the risk of death and injury on different roads more meaningful and stimulate public discussion. In terms of the results discussed in the previous section of this paper, an important aspect of AusRAP is that it will help to make the connection individual responsibility and the role of road infrastructure in road safety. It will highlight sections of road where improvements might be warranted, but also where road users may need to modify their behaviour to minimise risk—perhaps by reducing their speed—until road improvements are made.

AusRAP's model for reducing death and injury aligns closely with Sweden's *Vision Zero*. It is based on roads and vehicles that have forgiving designs. When a crash happens, both road and vehicle must work together to cushion against injury. Details on the first round of results produced under the first protocol, Risk Mapping, will be presented at the conference.

Conclusion

Motorists vastly underestimate the true extent of the road safety problem. When asked to estimate the number people killed on the roads each year, more than a third motorists believe the number is less than 300—substantially less than the actual 2003 result of 1,628. The median result was only 500. Motorists also have very narrow understanding of the ways in which safety might be improved. The main focus of motorists' attitudes to road safety is on how people drive, rather than on road or car safety. The emphasis is on individual responsibility, with the role of government largely seen as the encouragement and enforcement of safer driver behaviour.

Thus, roads represent a missing link in the motorists' understanding about road safety, which in itself is a flagging issue. The efforts of so many road safety professionals over many years is to be applauded. But our research shows much more must be done and not only by the professionals. While road safety undoubtedly deserves a strong commitment from governments on its merits, realistically it has only limited community support and therefore little impetus to drive ongoing and significant improvements in the road toll.

The *SaferRoads* project is designed to raise the profile of road safety in the community and with decision makers. A leading initiative that the AAA and its constituent clubs is pursuing in this respect is the Australian Road Assessment Program (AusRAP). AusRAP is designed to connect the 'missing link' in motorists' understanding of road safety issues by raising awareness about the importance of safe roads and of the need for well-targeted investment. An important aspect of AusRAP is that it will help to make the connection individual responsibility and the role of road infrastructure in road safety. It will highlight sections of road where improvements might be warranted, but also where road users may need to modify their behaviour to minimise risk—perhaps by reducing their speed—until road improvements are made.