

# Indigenous road safety in Australia and the “Drivesafe NT Remote” project

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## Abstract

Indigenous Australians are substantially more likely than the non-Indigenous population to be killed or seriously injured in a road crash and much more likely to receive a custodial sentence for unlicensed driving. A number of projects in Australia have been designed to address these issues. The “DriveSafe NT Remote” Project makes advances on previous projects by providing an ‘on-site’ opportunity for Indigenous people to obtain a licence, by bringing a driver trainer and full Motor Vehicle Registry services to remote communities. The two-year trial program provides help with proof of identity, training, and licence testing. This paper describes the program, its implementation, the logic behind the expectation of road safety gains, and early results. Process analysis shows that a large proportion of clients needed help with proof of identity, which is challenging for many Indigenous people. Interest within Indigenous communities has exceeded all expectations and 318 learner licences have been issued in less than a year of operation, passing the target of 280 licences that was set for the first two years of the program, while 67 drivers have moved from learner to provisional status or have advanced to public passenger vehicle licences. The *DriveSafe NT Remote* team has also issued another 125 licences outside of the project scope while in communities, including renewals and upgrades. They have also delivered training on Motor Vehicle Registry processes for many community members including local police officers, local government officers and teachers. The program has also generated flow-on benefits including increasing employment and social opportunities in remote communities.

## Keywords:

Indigenous road safety, driver licensing, driver training, remote road safety

## Introduction

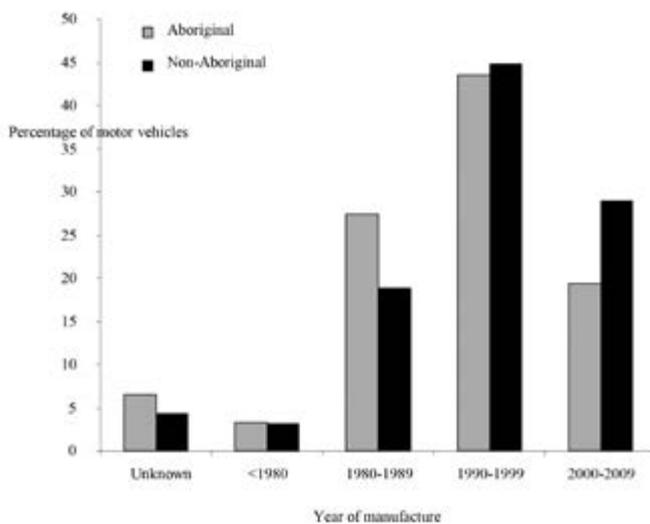
Based on age standardised rates, Indigenous Australians are 2.7 times more likely to be killed in a road crash and 1.2 times more likely to suffer a serious traffic-related injury than non-Indigenous Australians [1]. Henley and Harrison’s [1] analysis also found that the fatality rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander car occupants was 2.9 times that of other Australian car occupants, while the fatality rate among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders as pedestrians was 5.5 times that of other Australians as pedestrians. For serious injury the equivalent values were 1.6 and 2.5. In addition, these data represent an underestimation (of unknown size) of road trauma rates for Indigenous people, due to under-reporting of Indigenous status [2, 3]. Serious injuries (defined through admission to hospital) may also be under-reported for Indigenous people, who have more difficult and distant access to hospital treatment.

The problem has been recognised for some time [4] and formed the basis of relevant actions in the Rural Road Safety Plan 1996 [5], discussed later.

The over-representation of Indigenous people in road trauma reflects the influence of a number of factors, including remoteness and road related features associated with remoteness [6, 7], less access to safe vehicles (for example, see Figure 1 from NSW Centre for Road Safety [2], and see [4]), larger numbers of passengers, and lower rates of licensed drivers [8].

Rates of fatality and serious injury among Indigenous people increase with remoteness. Among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 70% of those fatally injured and 60% of those seriously injured resided in outer regional, remote or very remote areas. By contrast, close to four-fifths of other Australians fatally and seriously injured resided in major cities or inner regional areas [1]. The increased representation of Indigenous people in remote area trauma in part reflects place of residence and issues with remote roads [see 6].

In addition, a significantly higher proportion of car passengers relative to car drivers were fatally or seriously injured among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, compared with other Australians [1]. This may be related to greater numbers of vehicle occupants per vehicle for Indigenous people [2].



**Figure 1: Year of manufacture of vehicles involved in fatal crashes in NSW [from 2]**

Remote area crashes are also likely to be more severe, due to less forgiving roads, to delays in emergency responses and greater rates of risky driving, including drink-driving [for analysis of Queensland data see 9]. The Fifth Indigenous Road Safety Forum in 2010 reported evidence of a number of contributory factors critical in Aboriginal road safety risk, with data available from New South Wales (NSW): 33% of Aboriginal fatalities were not wearing restraints compared with 21% for the rest of the NSW population; 50% of Aboriginal drivers and riders killed were over 0.05 compared with 26% [2].

Analyses of the Vehicle Accident Database of the NT Department of Transport show that in the Northern Territory, 50% of the people killed in road crashes are Indigenous. In comparison, Indigenous Territorians make up about 30% of the Northern Territory's population. Of the Indigenous fatalities, 58% were not wearing a seatbelt (compared to 42% of non-Indigenous fatalities) and 65% were alcohol related, compared to 35% of non-Indigenous fatalities [10].

A number of factors contribute to the increased risk of crashes and increased severity of outcome in the event of a crash for Indigenous people. Factors contributing to crash risk include drink-driving and lack of licensing (considered below). Factors contributing to increased severity of outcome in the event of a crash include remoteness (slower emergency response time, higher speed limit roads), poorer roads, lack of seat belt use, more occupants per vehicle, and older, less protective vehicles.

This paper reports on the *DriveSafe NT Remote* trial program which greatly improves access to licensing processes for Indigenous people in remote communities. The paper reviews the Indigenous road safety problem,

describes the project and the road safety rationale for it, and finally presents early results from the trial.

## The unlicensed driving problem: context and brief history

In NSW from 2000 to 2009, 18 of 36 Indigenous drivers killed were unauthorised drivers (50%) compared with 9% for the non-Aboriginal population [1]. These data suggest that unlicensed driving among Indigenous people is an Australia-wide problem rather than a problem only for the states and territories with vast very remote areas.

It is critical to understand the reasons for the high rate of unlicensed driving by Indigenous people, and the failure of conventional methods of addressing the problem [8]. Indigenous lack of access to effective transport is part of, and perpetuates, the broader economic and social deprivation [4, 8]. Indigenous Australians have difficulty legally accessing the road transport system as licensed drivers due to a nested set of issues including challenges with proof of identity, language, literacy, numeracy [8], remoteness, and access to training [4, 8]. Lack of formal birth records creates difficulties with proof of identity and of age, as normally required for licensing, and names may be changed during a person's lifetime for cultural reasons. For some Indigenous people, for whom English is not their native language, this challenge is compounded by the need for sound English literacy skills and understanding of formal processes in order to determine the appropriate course of action to overcome the problem. In the Northern Territory context, the remoteness of communities and vast distances between major population centres creates additional challenges to accessing driver training service providers and relevant authorities. There is often also limited access to legal vehicles. Similar problems are faced by Indigenous communities in the remote regions of Western Australia, Queensland, South Australia and NSW. Furthermore, the problem is self-perpetuating: the lack of licensed drivers in Indigenous communities to begin with makes access to supervising drivers more difficult for learners.

The social consequences of these factors and outcomes are profound. Indigenous people without a driver's licence are unable to access many employment opportunities which require driving for work, as well as opportunities which require driving to reach the point of employment. The lack of a driver's licence also limits access to education and other services, as well as social opportunities. This contributes to the continuing economic gap between Indigenous Australians and others.

The lack of effective transport, as well as commonly unsealed roads and the dust they create, also contribute to other health issues and ineffective treatment of them [8].

Lack of licensing also contributes profoundly to the incarceration of Indigenous people. Analyses of records for this paper show that in the Northern Territory, about 82% of all prisoners are Indigenous, and driving offenders make up about 25% of the prison population. Analysis of incarcerations also points to the failure of conventional means of addressing the problem, though stronger enforcement. Anthony and Bragg [8] present a detailed analysis of the effects of increased enforcement in remote Indigenous communities following the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007* (Commonwealth) which had the indirect effect of greatly increasing enforcement of driving related offences including unlicensed driving. Consequently, driving offences were criminalised through high rates of custodial sentences [11] yet recidivism did not drop and road safety did not improve [8]. Thus, the usually highly successful approach of more effective enforcement did not work in this case. Enforcement can be expected to work when the required safe/legal behaviour is a viable alternative. However, in this circumstance with so many barriers to the required legal behaviour (of having a licence before driving) enforcement alone is unlikely to succeed. This pattern of outcome is consistent with repeated questioning of the top-down approach to policy and enforcement to address Indigenous issues (for example, see the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody), and the problem is particularly acute for driving offences which have been the majority of recorded Indigenous offences since 2006 [8].

The problems of unlicensed driving, remoteness, barriers to licensing and greater road safety risk for Indigenous people are well recognised [4, 6, 8, 10] and the top end jurisdictions as well as NSW, Victoria, and South Australia have all introduced programs with the aim of facilitating driver licensing for Indigenous people. These have included Western Australia's Driver Support Program, NSW's driver's licence program in Wilcannia and dedicated Aboriginal driver training officers in Lismore and elsewhere. There are a number of programs in Queensland [12] including one with greatly improved pass rates [13]; South Australia's Right Turn Driver Education Program, and Victoria's Let's GET connected Gippsland East Aboriginal driver education project [see 8], plus a number of programs in the NT [14,15].

### Strategic Directions

Analyses of the barriers to Indigenous licensing and analysis of existing programs [e.g., 4, 8, 12] lead to several key recommendations in common, including diversion of resources from enforcement to facilitation of licensing, the need for improved access to licensing for Indigenous people, improved access to driver training, the need for access to be supplied via bringing it to the remote communities rather than expecting the communities to travel to distant facilities, the need to address issues with

proof of identity and language/literacy issues. Various programs as listed above have included a number of these features.

The Rural Road Safety Action Plan 1996 [5] acknowledged the distinctive and substantial problems of rural and remote road safety, including the issues faced by Indigenous people. However, the action called for was not specific ("formulate special arrangements..." to address the problem), and it was subsequently criticised in the Australian College of Road Safety policy papers for failure to deliver. However, the above list of programs addressing the issue in many Australian jurisdictions, shows that action has occurred since then.

Programs, which address the road safety and related problems arising from the difficulties Indigenous people face in obtaining a licence to drive are consistent with a number of recent strategic considerations as well as the recommendations of the analyses cited above.

First, the National Road Safety Strategy (NRSS) [10] addresses Indigenous safety in many areas of endeavour, including safe systems, safe roads and safe people. The Strategy again notes the over-representation of Indigenous people in road trauma and the poor access to related services. It identifies the strategic direction to substantially improve access to graduated licensing, and to vehicles with higher safety ratings, for Indigenous people (p84). The NRSS calls for actions to improve Indigenous safety, including the following: "Implement programs addressing the road safety needs of Indigenous communities and disadvantaged groups ...[including]... Develop and implement programs to increase the opportunities for driving practice for disadvantaged learner drivers, particularly in Indigenous communities (p85)."

Finally, the NRSS also identified synergies with strategic commitments such as meeting the *Closing the Gap* target for Indigenous people of reducing the 17-year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Improved employment opportunities available to licensed drivers also reduce economic and social disadvantage.

Relevant recommendations from the Fifth Indigenous Road Safety Forum held in Coffs Harbour in 2010 [16] included:

1. A fund for Indigenous road safety projects be established by the National Road Safety Council (NRSC). Funds could be directed to projects on agreed road safety priorities that produce measurable change, sustainability and capacity for replication in other settings; and
2. Each jurisdiction, based on their particular circumstances, develops Indigenous road safety programs and policies to address alcohol use, restraint use, licensing, vehicle safety, public transport access and roads.

The *DriveSafe NT Remote* trial project reported here is consistent with these recommendations.

## The logic behind expected road safety benefits

The *DriveSafe NT Remote* trial aims to provide a holistic approach to Indigenous driver education and licensing in remote communities, including access to relevant authorities, help with proof of identity, road safety education, driver training and testing. Improved licensing rates offer a powerful tool for improved access to employment and health care and thus reduce the life expectancy gap as well as economic and social disadvantage.

The case for road safety benefits is not as obvious and thus is outlined below. This is because improved licensing rates may be seen simply as creating increased exposure through more Indigenous people driving. However, given the existing extensive and well recognised problem of unlicensed driving in remote communities, any increase in driving exposure is likely to be small, and may be offset by reducing the demand to carry more passengers than there are seat belts. A number of benefits should accrue to offset any small increase in driving exposure.

Unlicensed driving itself is likely to contribute to the key behavioural risk factors associated with Indigenous over-representation in serious crashes: drink-driving; lack of seat belt use; and even use of older, less safe vehicles. Lack of licensing is a likely contributor to these crash risk factors through three core mechanisms. First, despite the broad lack of good evidence for safety benefits of training of car handling skills and advanced driver training, as concluded in the key Chochrane Library review [17], and explanations of this failure [18], there is evidence for the safety benefits of on-road experience with a supervising driver prior to beginning solo driving [19, and see 20]. Thus, the lack of training and licensing processes is likely to contribute to less safe solo driving. Second, key elements of driver behaviour management in every state of Australia include the demerit point system and the threat of licence loss. These systems provide a significant disincentive for illegal driving behaviours such as non-use of seat belts, drink-driving, and speeding. Furthermore, there is evidence suggesting that the demerit points provide a stronger disincentive than fines [21]. This disincentive process is obviated by driving unlicensed. In addition, the attitudes and beliefs created by starting a driving career outside the law, and by perceiving little choice in this behaviour (due to lack of access to supervised practice opportunities, the licensing process, and proof of identity) may not engender safe driving. Rather, driving under these circumstances, at least initially, provides practical rewards (such as mobility) for ignoring road rules. In these circumstances road rules regarding blood alcohol concentration limits, seat belt use, and driving a registered vehicle may seem largely irrelevant when driving unlicensed.

Finally, at a broader level, programs which provide access to licensing and supervised on-road practice for remote and disadvantaged people may also benefit licensing policy for the entire population. With the evidence for reduced crash rates by novice drivers following more hours of on-road supervised practice, many jurisdictions have moved to, or are considering mandating, more hours of supervised driving before the learner is allowed to move to the next stage of licensing. A limiting factor for such policy is access to the required training for remote and disadvantaged people. Programs such as *DriveSafe NT Remote* help overcome this barrier and thus may allow more effective training of novice drivers throughout the relevant state, territory or country.

## The *DriveSafe NT remote* trial

In response to the above evidence, logic and strategic needs, the Northern Territory Department of Transport, the (former) National Road Safety Council (NRSC), the Territory Insurance Office (TIO) and the Australian Government are supporting an innovative Indigenous driver access, training and education program being delivered to specific Indigenous communities in remote areas of the NT over a two-year period. The program, which commenced in April 2012, is being delivered to 14 remote major communities across the Northern Territory.

All 14 communities selected to participate in the *DriveSafe NT Remote* trial identified driver licensing and/or road safety as significant issues for their development in their Local Implementation Plans that have been developed through community consultation with all levels of government. By delivering a holistic program, *DriveSafe NT Remote* aims to not only support novice drivers to obtain a C class licence, but also to improve road safety outcomes and driver behaviour, achieve greater access to job opportunities and services and reduce incarceration rates for driving offences.

Success of *DriveSafe NT Remote* is critically dependent on the level of local community buy-in and endorsement. To achieve this buy-in, extensive consultation is undertaken with community leaders and local organisations prior to the program's commencement. This allows the community to identify its priority groups for the program (such as students, Commonwealth Development and Employment Program employees, young mothers, and young men); to identify a minimum of 20 potential participants; outline existing local services (with which the program may co-ordinate to avoid duplication and increase local ownership); and any cultural or other constraints that must be considered.

Core elements of the *DriveSafe NT Remote* program being delivered in each identified community includes help with proof of identification, such as accessing birth certificates;

theory tutorials on road rules in a group setting; learners licence testing; formal driving lessons; supervised mentor driving lessons; road crash first aid training; knowledge for car owners; road safety; drug and alcohol awareness; and on-road tests. In recognition that most program participants will have English as a second, third or even fourth language, both training and testing are undertaken verbally, with visual aids, to address some challenges of lower literacy levels. Significantly, the program is free of cost for participants at each step – including accessing a birth certificate, getting their Learner licence, and undertaking driving lessons and tests.

This work is carried out over a period of several months, during which time the *DriveSafe NT Remote* team will spend week-long blocks in the community. These intensive blocks are supported by the mentoring and development of community-based Learner Driver Mentors, who provide supervised driving practice throughout the program delivery. The visiting team includes a driving instructor who delivers training, and a Motor Vehicle Registry Officer to help with proof of identity and other licensing issues. For proof of identity resolution the *DriveSafe Remote* staff act as a point of liaison between the client and Births, Deaths and Marriages. Resolution is pursued by officers in processes after the visit to the community and includes

other processes such as making applications for a change of name, to resolve inconsistencies between birth records and current name, which may have changed.

The program works with local ‘host’ organisations to champion and support its delivery in the community, including arranging access to accommodation and training facilities and promotion and coordination of program participants. The pre-consultation with the community recognises the diversity of the communities participating in the trial program, and supports the *DriveSafe NT Remote* team to tailor the program delivery to suit the particular circumstances of each community. See Figure 2 for an example of materials. This approach fosters a true collaboration, reducing risks that can flow from imposing a ‘one-size fits all, top down’ program.

Teaching includes classroom instruction and on-road experience with mentors. Video of the program being run is available from the ABS 7:30 report on the program: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2012-11-16/learning-to-drive-in-the-bush/4377274> or from: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WcK2miCiVHw>. The *DriveSafe NT Remote* Facebook page – [www.facebook.com/drivesafentremote](http://www.facebook.com/drivesafentremote) has many stories, photos and information about program activities.

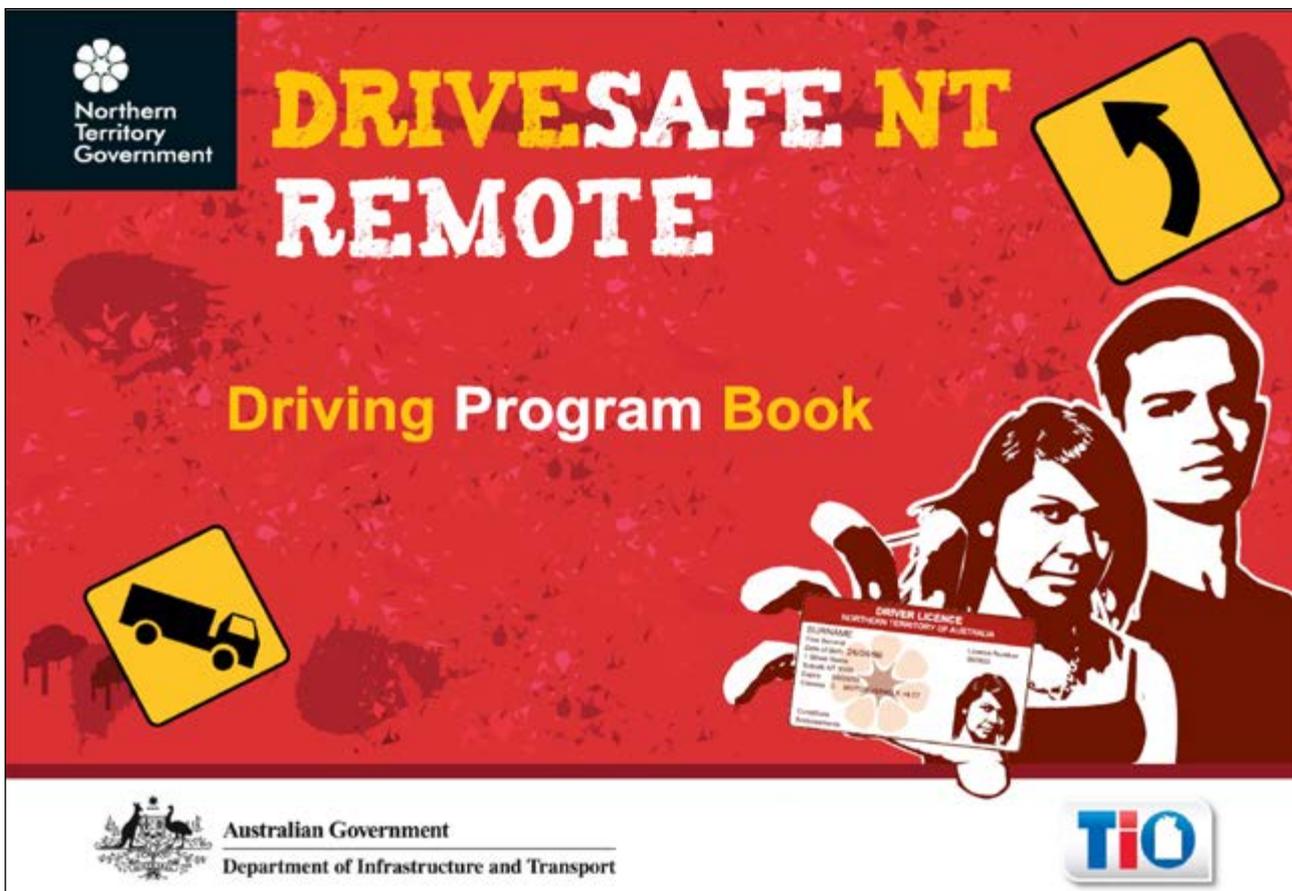


Figure 2: Cover page of the participant handbook

Further monitoring of output and evaluation of the program is underway, although full scale crash outcome evaluation may be limited by the sample size and thus available statistical power.

## Early Results

Results from the first year to date of *DriveSafe NT Remote* show a strong take-up in the initial communities of Yirrkala, Gunyangara, Angurugu, Umbakumba, Wurrumiyanga, Gapuwiyak, and Galiwinku.

In 2012, 318 Indigenous people had passed the learner licence test and been issued with a Learners licence (148 males and 170 females), and a further 67 Provisional licences were issued (34 males and 33 females). The team spent 170 days in remote communities and delivered 1064 driving lessons as participants progressed toward gaining their provisional licence. The first 10 weeks of experience showed great interest with classes averaging 29.7 participants per community, well above the target of 20 per community. *DriveSafe NT Remote* team members also delivered tests for public passenger licences with seven such licences being issued and assisted many people with proof of identity documents. This included the issuing of 127 Birth Certificates.

While this is a trial program running over two years in 14 pre-selected communities, it has generated strong interest from local government and service providers outside of these areas, as well as individual communities expressing their interest in participation, which is leading to expansion of the program.

In each expression of interest, the difficulty of gaining a licence, and the importance of being a licensed driver, are acknowledged. Many highlight the job opportunities on offer within their organisation for licensed drivers, should access to a driver training program be available.

Receiving a driver's licence can be likened to receiving a passport. As a passport opens up opportunity to explore the world, so too does a driver's licence open up opportunity to access jobs, health services, education and social connections. Particularly for Indigenous women, a driver's licence delivers freedom of movement for themselves and their children.

## Conclusions

The problems faced by Indigenous communities, especially those in remote areas, in obtaining drivers licences have been recognised for some time and a number of programs exist in Australia to address the key limiting factors. The *DriveSafe NT Remote* program addresses the key recommendations arising from many analyses of the problem [4, 5, 8], by providing facilities, training, a Motor

Registry officer, help with proof of identity, and a driver mentoring program in communities.

In the short time the program has been running, 318 Indigenous people have received their learner licence, already passing the original target of 280 in the first two years. Substantial additional benefits are already identifiable. As an unexpected benefit of having the relevant staff available in the community, seven people were able to upgrade their licences to allow them to work as commercial passenger vehicle drivers, thereby allowing remote "bus services" to be provided in their communities. Sixty-seven have been tested and moved from learners to provisional drivers. Of the 510 licences issued through the *DriveSafe NT Remote* program since April 2012 only two have been suspended for drink driving. It is hoped that further evaluations will continue to demonstrate success and that programs modelled on this process of bringing facilities, proof of identity, driver training, testing, on-road experience, and ultimately licensing to Indigenous communities will be implemented systematically across Australia.

Other critical aspects of Indigenous road safety, such as improving roads and the safety of roadsides within and around Indigenous communities [23] and for remote areas more broadly [6,7], remain to be effectively addressed and will help improve a key area of road trauma over-representation in Australia.

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