Submission No 63

SPEED LIMITS AND ROAD SAFETY IN REGIONAL NSW

Organisation: Police Association of NSW

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Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety

Inquiry into Speed limits and road safety in regional NSW

Submission of the Police Association of NSW

July 2022

Road safety is one of the core duties of the NSW Police Force. Our members are highly committed to the safety of road users, these duties form a significant part of their workload, and attending to traffic accidents is a dangerous activity for our members, both physically and psychologically.

Regional NSW makes up a disproportionately high number of road fatalities, so for regional police officers, road trauma is a major part of their lives.

We received feedback from members in preparing this submission, which indicated strong support for the following:

- The need to significantly improve road surfaces and infrastructure in Regional NSW,
- Police officer advice and data influencing Local Traffic Committees regarding speed limits, and
- Variable speed limits.

(a) The impact of speed limits and travel times on driver behaviour and safety

Local knowledge influencing speed limits

Our members who provided feedback for this submission indicated the need for police advice and data to be properly regarded in Local Traffic Committees, to ensure local knowledge about the conditions and driver behaviours in those areas is factored in to speed limits, along with suitable awareness and education strategies.

It is well known that increased speed is a significant cause of road accidents and increases the severity of accidents. Higher speed adversely affects the time available to react, stopping distances, and the impact of a crash.

It only takes a slight increase in speed to significantly affect these factors.

Therefore a number of our members identified roads in their Police Districts they submitted should have speed limits reduced. They identified inadequate road infrastructure for current limits (eg road surfaces, narrow roads, lack of run off areas, and placement of barriers).

Reductions of only 10-20 kms can make a large difference to safety, without significantly affecting travel times.

Additional to this general principle though, driver behaviour means a blanket approach to reducing speed limits is not always the answer either. For example, lower speed limits can lead to longer travel times, fatigue, and increased driver frustration and therefore risky behaviour, like overtaking in unsafe circumstances.

This is why local police knowledge influencing the setting of speed limits is crucial: one size does not fit all, and police are well placed to contribute valuable experience to this process.

Amendments to speed limits should not wait for a fatality to occur, police know when dangerous driving is occurring and the conditions that are contributing to them.

Exceeding the speed limit

Exceeding the speed limit by even a small amount has a large impact on the likelihood and severity of an accident.

The Centre for Road Safety States:

> Most drivers believe they can easily handle driving slightly over the speed limit, and that this behaviour is not dangerous. However, the truth is that most speeding deaths occur at no more than 10km/h over the speed limit. Evidence shows that small changes in speed can have big impact on the outcome of a crash:
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> - Going 5 km/h over in a 60km/h zone doubles your risk of having a crash
> - Going 10 km/h over in a 60km/h zone means you're four times more likely to be injured in a crash.

Therefore our members have advised that strategies to ensure drivers comply with speed limits, including police intervention and enforcement, are just as crucial as setting the speed limit.

b) The impact of improved vehicle technology and road infrastructure

The condition of roads

Our members expressed serious concern about the conditions of road surfaces in rural NSW, and the impact this has on driver safety.

Our members commented that this was the most pressing need for attention in this Inquiry.

The availability of road infrastructure data in Australia is poor[1], which makes it difficult to confirm the relationship between road quality and accidents and casualties on Australian roads.

Our members are telling us this is a significant factor, and therefore we submit it would be useful to examine the ability to collect data regarding road infrastructure centrally, in particular relating to road surface quality, the percentage of sealed roads, bitumen quality, separation of roads and the quality of that delineation, and signage.

This indicates a need to review current road construction standards and maintenance, and potentially investigate a national road quality standard. Our members also indicated their support for this in their feedback for this Inquiry.

Given the severe damage to our roads caused by recent weather events, and the likely increase in such extreme weather in the future, the need to review these standards and repair damaged roads is urgent.

[1] Sujanie Peiris , Janneke Berecki-Gisolf, Bernard Chen and Brian Fildes, "Road Trauma in Regional and Remote Australia and New Zealand in Preparedness for ADAS Technologies and Autonomous Vehicles", Sustainability 2020, 12, p16.

General principles support our members' feedback, as research indicates expenditure on road maintenance and conservation correlates with reduced road mortality.[2]

Our members also indicated the effectiveness of road infrastructure such as:

- LED Light Signs, including "reduce speed" reminders, including those that display the drivers speed as they approach, and
- Rippled centre lines and fog lines.

In conjunction with reengineering of roads and the improvement of road surfaces, road fatalities can be significantly reduced.

Other road infrastructure

Our members identified overtaking practices as a factor in accident risk, and therefore supported more overtaking/passing lanes on regional roads.

They also identified widened double separation lines as doubly beneficial – spacing vehicles traveling in opposite directions further apart increases safety for road users, and also provides emergency services vehicles with greater visibility and access when attending road incidents.

Vehicle technology

Vehicle technology can significantly improve the safety of road users. The increased prevalence of new vehicles into the fleet of a population increases the likelihood that those road users will benefit from these technologies.[3]

The average age of vehicles used by Australians is 10.6 years and this is identified by some studies as a slow uptake of new vehicles, and therefore new safety technology.[4]

Recent improvements to vehicle technology have the greatest impact when those vehicles are on high quality roads. Where road quality and delineation is poor, driver assistance technology is less effective.

This may be a major reason why the prevalence of new vehicles is comparable amongst regional and metropolitan populations, but the rate of accidents and fatalities in Regional areas remains disproportionately high – the benefits of new vehicle technology is reduced for road users in remote areas with lower quality roads.[5]

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[2] Francisco Calvo-Poyo , José Navarro-Moreno and Juan de Oña, "Road Investment and Traffic Safety: An International Study", *Sustainability*, 2020, 12.

[3] Potterton, P.; Ockwell, A.; Cross, J.; Newstead, S.; Pekol, A. Benefits of Reducing the Age of the Australian Light Vehicle Fleet: Report for the Australian Automobile Association; Australian Automobile Association: Hall, Australia, 2017; pp. 1–97.

[4] Sujanie Peiris , Janneke Berecki-Gisolf, Bernard Chen and Brian Fildes, "Road Trauma in Regional and Remote Australia and New Zealand in Preparedness for ADAS Technologies and Autonomous Vehicles", Sustainability 2020, 12, p16.

[5] Sujanie Peiris , Janneke Berecki-Gisolf, Bernard Chen and Brian Fildes, "Road Trauma in Regional and Remote Australia and New Zealand in Preparedness for ADAS Technologies and Autonomous Vehicles", Sustainability 2020, 12, p16.

c) The use of variable speed limits

Variable speed limits were strongly supported by the members we consulted.

They supported the ability for authorities to:

- set safe speed limits according to variable conditions, such as snow, ice, rain, debris, breakdowns or accidents,
- control traffic flow when responding services attend accidents or to clear roads, keeping those personnel safe, but also
- increase speed limits when safe to do so to reduce travel times.

d) Any other related matters.

Our members identified a nationally consistent approach to road rules, licencing, registration and insurance, and a national standard for road design and maintenance would ensure consistent, high standard conditions and behavioural expectations for road users, wherever they were in Australia.

Conclusion

We thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this Inquiry. Please let us know if we can be of any further assistance to the Committee.

Kevin Morton

President – Police Association of NSW