

**INTERVENTIONS TO REDUCE ROAD TRAUMA IN REGIONAL NSW CAUSED  
BY SPEEDING, FATIGUE, DRINK AND DRUG DRIVING**

**Organisation:** UNSW Ageing Futures Institute

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SYDNEY



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## Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety (Staysafe)

Interventions to reduce road trauma in regional NSW caused by speeding, fatigue, drink and drug driving

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Dear Standing Committee,

I welcome the opportunity to submit to the Joint Standing Committee on Road Safety about interventions to reduce road trauma in regional NSW caused by speeding, fatigue, drink and drug driving acknowledging the necessity for this inquiry as Australians including many older Australians, particularly in regional NSW, are impacted by road trauma.

## Background

National data has shown that regional NSW's age distribution is skewed towards older age brackets – with 20.6% of Regional NSW's population aged 65 or over (compared to 13.5% in Greater Sydney) [1]. Whilst Australia's population as a whole is ageing, regional areas (such as Regional NSW) are expected to be more affected (more aged) over the coming decades [2].

Focusing on the safety of older drivers in regional NSW is not only addressing current risks but also proactively preparing for the demands of an ageing population. By 2066, it is projected that older people in Australia will make up between 21% and 23% of the total population [3]. Regional NSW residents aged over 75 will constitute the largest age group by 2036, increasing from 8.8% of the regional population to 15.9%. This represents a 7.1% increase in the total population share. The 65-74 year age group is also expected to increase, while all other age groups are forecast to shrink by 2041 [1].

Additionally, in rural and regional NSW, older people often face difficulty in getting around due to limited access to transport and transport options, and many rely on private motor vehicles [4].

## Summary

Please find the following comments and recommendations in relation to interventions to reduce road trauma in regional NSW caused by speeding, fatigue, drink and drug driving.

### (a) Research and data on regional NSW-specific factors, characteristics and demographics of road crashes

- Older people represent a vulnerable group in road trauma statistics. In 2023, people aged 60 and over accounted for over 20% of road fatalities in NSW, with a significant portion occurring in regional areas [5]
- NSW road crash data shows that people aged 75 years or over are 3 times more likely to be killed in a crash than people in their 20s, and this risk increases for people aged 85 or over, who are at least 4 times more likely to be killed [6]
- Older people are more disproportionately impacted by road crash injuries - A person aged 75+ injured and hospitalised in a road crash spends on average seven days in hospital, whereas for ages between 25 and 54, the average is four days [7]
- Crash patterns for older drivers are significantly different to those of other age groups. The most common crashes for drivers aged 80 and older are colliding with: another vehicle at an intersection when turning right across traffic or the rear of a vehicle in front (rear-end) [6]

### (b) Effectiveness of current strategies and programs to reduce speeding, fatigue, drink and drug driving in regional NSW

- As people age they are more likely to be taking several medications. Polypharmacy – the use of multiple medications – is common among older Australians. About two-thirds of Australians aged 75 years and over are taking five or more medicines, including over-the-counter and complementary medicines [8]. Whilst there is mounting evidence between polypharmacy significantly increasing risk



of crashed [9, 10], further studies, awareness and programs around the impact of polypharmacy on road safety are required in Australia.

- Education campaigns targeting younger drivers are often not relevant to older drivers. Community-based programs such as the NSW's Older Drivers Forums provide information on safe driving, licence options, and health factors, but these are less accessible/inconsistently available in regional areas.
- Recent findings have identified existing tools used in Australia – such as high-contrast visual acuity tests the Mini-Mental State Exam (MMSE) often used as part of a General Practitioner (GP)'s assessment to determine a person's fitness to drive – do not reliably identify at-risk older drivers [11]. These tools have extremely low sensitivity for detecting unsafe drivers – particularly those living with cognitive impairments and dementia – conditions that are expected to significantly increase amongst Australians with the ageing population.

#### (c) Proposed measures to reduce road trauma in regional NSW

To effectively reduce road trauma, particularly amongst older drivers, it is essential to understand how clinicians currently assess fitness to drive (FtD), and what barriers prevent best practice. In 2024, my team conducted a national practice audit of 144 clinicians across Australia who are involved in FtD assessments of older drivers. Findings showed wide variation in the assessment approaches, limited access to validated screening tools, and a lack of standardised protocols. General practitioners in particular reported low confidence, minimal formal training, and challenges in navigating licensing decisions, issues that are even more prominent in regional settings, where specialist support, such as on-road driving assessments, are less accessible. Reducing road trauma requires more than targeting driver behaviour, and also depends on equipping clinicians with the tools, knowledge, and support they need to identify at-risk drivers early, to make evidence-based decisions, and to guide safe driving transitions. Strengthening clinician education and confidence, and providing standardised tools will support more consistent and timely interventions, particularly for older drivers in regional NSW who may be at greater risk and have fewer alternatives to driving.

To address recent findings of the low sensitivity of GP/clinician tools to assess older driver safety, the Driving, Ageing and Health Research Team (DART) at UNSW are developing a suite of practical resources aimed at improving the assessment, management, and communication of FtD decisions for older adults. These initiatives include:

- To fill an observed gap in the lack of comprehensive and evidence-based education and knowledge for older drivers, DART have created a website - <https://ageingwellontheroad.com.au/> [12] - designed to support older drivers, clinicians and family members by offering reliable information, tips, expert advice and practical resources.
- The Multi-Domain (Multi-D) screening tool: An online app that combines tasks such as reaction time and motion sensitivity to estimate the risk of driving assessment failure in older adults. This tool builds on a validated, lab-based model [13] and is intended to support early identification of at-risk drivers in a quick, accessible format. This aims to reduce the number of referrals to formal on-road driving assessments, which are often costly, time-consuming, and less accessible for older adults living in regional NSW.
- On-Road Driver Safety and Outcome Measure (ORDSOM): An online scoring tool app designed to support occupational therapists during on-road driving assessments of older adults. It will allow for real-time error tracking and generate a Driver Safety Rating Score with a summary report and tailored training recommendations for the driver. A training manual has also been developed to



guide occupational therapists and driving instructors in interpreting scores, referring unsafe drivers, and delivering feedback, filling a major gap in current post-assessment resources.

- General Practitioner e-learning module: A new online module is being developed to support GP's in assessing older drivers. It includes guidance on age-related health and functional changes, licensing requirements, how to structure difficult conversations, and available referral pathways. This module is intended to build clinician confidence in conducting this assessment and will likely be available on the *Ageing Well On The Road* website in the future. Tailored modules for other clinicians, such as occupational therapists, is planned for the future.
- While Advanced Driver Assistance Systems (ADAS) can enhance road safety and offer particular benefits for older drivers, addressing concerns around privacy, reliability and usability is key to building trust. Targeted education and age-inclusive design improvements can improve confidence in ADAS, ultimately supporting older drivers to stay mobile and safe for longer [14].
- UNSW researchers have evaluated a program of tailored driving lessons for older drivers. Pilot work demonstrated these effectively improved older driver safety, shifting a significant proportion of unsafe drivers into the 'safe' category [15]. Results of a larger trial will be available later this year. If effective, this will provide the basis and evidence-based design for recommending tailored driving lessons.

(d) Implementation of relevant recommendations from the 2023 Performance Audit Report of the Auditor-General

- Recommendations can benefit from a stronger overall focus on older regional drivers:
  - Ensure all road safety strategies implemented are evaluated, monitored and reported on by age cohort and regional area, enabling a better understanding of risk for older people.
  - Develop and scale initiatives using co-design methods with older people living in regional NSW to ensure relevance and effectiveness.
  - Prioritise regional areas with high ageing populations for tailored interventions.

(e) Any other related matters

- There needs to be a stronger focus on addressing education, increasing knowledge, trialling effective interventions, and licensing transitions for older people – particularly those living in regional areas such as regional NSW with little to no alternative transport.
- A stronger focus on identifying (through data collection and secondary data analysis of existing data) the key road safety risks of older drivers in regional areas – so policy and programs can support autonomy while promoting safety.

## Conclusion

Reducing road trauma in regional NSW requires interventions that acknowledge the growing population of older drivers and passengers. These residents face unique risks due to physical vulnerability, geographic isolation, and limited service access. By tailoring strategies to this cohort, NSW can improve road safety outcomes while preserving the independence and dignity of older people in the regions.



## Contributors

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## About the UNSW Ageing Futures Institute

The Institute is a global leader in ageing research and research translation, making a visible and positive impact on ageing both nationally and internationally. The Institute continues to drive excellence in health, social and policy outcomes in response to the major challenges and opportunities in ageing.

Our research is interdisciplinary in nature, meaning it brings together investigators from different disciplines working toward a common goal. The Institute draws together experts from across all UNSW Faculties including Art & Design, Arts & Social Sciences, Built Environment, Business, Engineering, Law, Medicine and Science. By capitalising on partnerships with a growing number of government, industry, community and academic collaborators, we ensure our research is translatable across the full spectrum of issues relating to ageing.

The Institute also takes a life-course approach to ageing, that is, we consider the events, choices, situations and influences of individuals from birth, and how these factors accumulate and impact ageing. We want people to not only live longer, but to age optimally throughout all stages of life.

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