

28 indigenous people

A high risk group

Along with diabetes and stroke, road crashes represent a major cause of death for indigenous Australians. Available data suggest that the number of road deaths involving indigenous Australians is rising. Australian Bureau of Statistics records show a substantial increase in indigenous road deaths – from 59 in 1997, to 92 in 1998. There were 62 deaths in 1999 and 68 in 2000.

In the period from 1997 to 2000, Western Australia and the Northern Territory had the highest number of indigenous road deaths. Car occupants and pick-up/utility occupants make up over half of

Indigenous Australians are a high-risk road user group and have a death rate about 3.5 times higher than non-indigenous Australians.

road deaths (57 per cent), with pedestrians also accounting for a large proportion of deaths (40 per cent). In the same period, male deaths were predominant, with the 15–24 age group particularly over-represented, followed by the 25–39 age group. Of the female deaths, the 35–39, 20–24, and 0–4 age groups are most represented.

New South Wales and Queensland have the highest proportions of the total indigenous population (28.4 per cent and 27.7 per cent respectively), following by Western Australia and the Northern Territory (14.4 per cent and 13.2 per cent respectively). Statistics for indigenous fatality crashes in urban versus rural areas are not available Australia-wide.

A classification of ‘indigenous’ is typically obtained through self-reported means, with definitions broadly including: persons of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander descent; persons who identify as indigenous; and persons who are accepted as such by the community in which they live.

Problems with data quality

Analysis of crashes involving indigenous people is limited by the availability of data that adequately and consistently identifies indigenous casualties. The data available contain considerable inconsistencies, mainly because of difficulties in identifying people who are indigenous in the crash statistics.

Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia are the only jurisdictions to identify indigenous involvement in road crash data. In addition, most health, transport and police crash data systems have not been linked, and therefore details connecting injury outcome with the crash-related cause are not easy to extract.

Road safety trends

The most common types of crashes are generally characterised by alcohol involvement, over-loaded vehicles, and lack of use of seat belts. Other road safety risk factors identified for indigenous Australians include riding in the open load-space of vehicles and unroadworthy vehicles. The data also suggest that indigenous Australians are over-represented in driving offences, particularly unlicensed driving.

It is estimated that about 70 per cent of indigenous Australians live in non-metropolitan areas and are therefore exposed to numerous cultural and environmental risk factors specific to rural and remote Australia. These include increased exposure through greater distances travelled, higher speed limits and poorer road quality (often unsealed), increased diversity in types of vehicles, and delays in accessing medical treatment and rehabilitation (see chapter 31). Road safety statistics may fail to capture the extent of off-road travel and its risks,

because statistics are not collected for crashes which occur on un-gazetted roads.

Research has identified vehicle choice and defects, and lower vehicle ownership (resulting in overcrowding) as significant contributors to rural and remote road trauma. There is also some evidence suggesting that indigenous Australians in rural areas are reluctant to use health care services even when they are available. Some possible reasons for this could be lack of insurance coverage, long travel distances to services, problems with transport and getting time off work, traditional rural values such as self-reliance, and a lack of knowledge about potential benefits.

The two most common types of crashes involving indigenous Australians are single-vehicle crashes (as vehicle occupants) on remote roads and crashes involving pedestrians both in and out of towns.

Research has highlighted the importance of following a community capacity-building and engagement process when working with indigenous communities and allowing for indigenous perspectives in health education initiatives.

Road safety interventions

Many community-based indigenous road safety programmes have focused on alcohol abuse, probably due to it being a major risk factor. In contrast, interventions to address the other known risk factors have been more limited. In addition, few indigenous road safety programmes are informed by local indigenous knowledge or systematic research with indigenous groups.

Some examples of interventions that address the known road safety risk factors for indigenous Australians are described below.

General Road Safety

A video, *Corrugations to Highways*, was produced as a joint initiative between Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia, with funding and marketing assistance provided by the ATSB. The video was developed with the participation of indigenous Australians, as a resource for teachers, driving instructors, police, community and health workers. It shows indigenous Australians providing messages about road safety and contains information on how to use the roads safely.

The Northern Territory Department of Transport has developed a programme targeting indigenous road users called ‘Kick a Goal for Road Safety’. Indigenous police officers present road safety messages to schools and clinics. Workshops are also run with indigenous night patrol staff to identify practical solutions to both crime-related and road safety related problems (e.g. pedestrians falling asleep on the roadway).

Community development programmes

A CD-ROM Community, Action Planning and Information Resource has been developed in Queensland to address community health issues. It complements a resource being developed which provides an inventory of road safety information and contacts and encourages communities to draw on both internal and external resources to solve local problems.

Licensing programmes

A licensing programme for prison inmates is being trialled in Queensland, which involves the provision of training for an oral licensing test instead of the standard written test.

Alcohol

The Office of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health has worked with the National Health and Medical Research Council to develop Australian Alcohol Guidelines (available at

www.health.gov.au). These guidelines specify safe levels of alcohol consumption for special groups.

Restraint wearing

A campaign in South Australia targets indigenous communities and provides information on child restraints. It includes brochures and stickers featuring indigenous artworks and illustrations to facilitate road safety messages.

Pedestrian safety

A project in a remote Western Australian location targets indigenous pedestrians. Its activities include the distribution of reflective wrist bands to hotel patrons to increase their visibility at night, dissemination of education materials, erection of WalkSafe signs, broadcasting pedestrian awareness messages on local and tourist radio, and installation of lighting on the main roads.

Vehicle purchasing and condition of vehicles

A project has been developed in New South Wales to assist indigenous car buyers to understand their basic consumer rights when purchasing or financing vehicles. It involves practical demonstrations of basic mechanical and safety checks and information sessions on purchasing pitfalls, guarantees and warranties for new and used vehicles, licensing procedures, options for borrowing money to finance a car, how to shop for the best deal, and consumer rights and responsibilities.

Legislation

There is strong evidence to suggest that restrictive legislation, coupled with enforcement, has the potential to greatly reduce the number of injuries sustained by passengers travelling in the open load-space of vehicles. For example, the Northern Territory Department of Transport has reported that open load-space legislation in the Territory resulted in a 75 per cent decrease in the number of serious injuries/fatalities in the Kimberley region.

Recommendations for the future

Research sponsored by the ATSB recommends that priority action be taken by jurisdictions that will:

- Develop consistent and reliable road safety data.
- Research historical and cultural factors influencing beliefs and perceptions about health and injury; and develop protocols for undertaking research in indigenous communities and coordinate research knowledge nationally.

- Develop tailored education and community change strategies which include community participation, conduct formal evaluations of local level road safety initiatives, and improve communities' road safety knowledge and training.
- Legislate to address known risky practices.

The Indigenous Road Safety Working Group, which is chaired by the ATSB, organises forums to progress indigenous road safety initiatives. Members of the working group include

representatives from the police and road safety authorities in the Northern Territory, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia.

The National Road Safety Action Plan 2003 and 2004 includes an action to develop an Internet-based clearing house to allow the national sharing of information about indigenous road safety activities. This is being progressed under the leadership of Western Australia.