

## ENVIRONMENT

# Do safer roads encourage risky driving behaviour?

**Safe and Scenic Toodyay Roads**  
Bethan Lloyd and Andrew St John

ROAD safety has been in the news lately.

This is because the latest accident figures show the road toll is not declining despite considerable expenditure on making roads safer.

Like many areas of public policy, the case for road improvements to improve road safety is not cut and dried.

For example, there is evidence to show that if drivers perceive a road to be dangerous they will drive more carefully and it might be argued that the case of Toodyay Road supports this view.

The wheatbelt roads safety review in 2015 showed that roads with speed limits of 110 kph had the greatest number of accidents.

Toodyay Road was the most dangerous up to 2015 with the highest killed or serious injured index.

Since 2015 the index has decreased possibly due to increased driver awareness. Increased police presence may also have had an effect.

Certainly, the index has decreased and been relatively stable before any improvements were commenced.

A theory called risk homeostasis or risk compensation can be used to explain driver behaviour, and just as knowledge of a road being dangerous leads drivers to be more cautious, the opposite is also true.

In other words, as safety features are added to vehicles and roads, drivers tend to increase their exposure to collision risk because they feel better protected.

So many people drive up to or close to the



*Do road improvements like these near Jingaling Brook and Toodyay Road lead to more risk taking? It almost certainly leads to more people exceeding the speed limit.*

speed limit and a significant number of people exceed it on improved sections of the road, especially when there are overtaking lanes.

We have all experienced many people driving in excess of the speed limit and overtaking on the improved Jingaling Brook section of Toodyay Road.

More of such behaviour will almost certainly occur should the planned improvements eventuate and it will be most interesting to see what effect this has on the index statistics.

Understanding more about the psychology of driver behaviour is acknowledged by many to be the key to trying to reduce the road toll.

One psychologist, Gerald Wilde, has said "Anyone wishing to reduce the risk of misfortune on the road to zero can do so by never using the roads, but that person would

also miss all the benefits accruing from road travel and thus live a greatly diminished life".

Clearly driving is an important necessity of life and we need to understand more about how people assess risk, and design road safety strategies accordingly.

Suboptimal risk-taking occurs if a person underestimates or overestimates the danger of a given activity, because that person would either take too much risk or too little for greatest net benefit.

A person learns to assess risk by perceiving the outcomes of decisions but it will also be honed by our experience and that of others, sometimes communicated through the mass media which will confirm or correct a person's perception of the size of the level of risk.

The Swedish experience with the change from left hand to right hand traffic in 1967 offers a telling example of how people assess risk.

Contrary to government and safety experts' expectations, the change was followed by an immediate and major reduction in the per capita traffic death and injury rates but which returned to original levels within two years.

These findings were believed to be due to the change leading to a sudden surge in the level of perceived risk, which was now much higher than the level of risk accepted, and people drove more cautiously which reduced the rate of road crashes.

After some time, people discovered, through their own and others' experience and through the mass media, that the roads were less dangerous than they had thought.

Now the risk was not as high as was tolerated and people became less cautious in their actions, causing the crash rate to return to previous levels.

Equally fascinating is that when Iceland changed over to right hand traffic in 1968 it experienced a similar short-term fluctuation in the rate of road crashes.

All such theories and explanations come in for some criticism – as mentioned earlier, road safety policy is not cut and dried.

In particular the argument that knowledge of a road being dangerous leads to people driving more cautiously might be seen as an excuse for doing nothing in the way of improvements.

That is clearly not the case with Toodyay Road and the Safe and Scenic Toodyay Roads (SASTR) campaign is with the whole community in wanting improvements.

The issue for debate is the level and extent of improvement and SASTR continues to argue for changes that resemble those carried out successfully in the metropolitan section of Toodyay Road.

The evidence suggests that such improvements would deliver equally satisfactory benefits and we have described these in our detailed submission sent to the Assistant Minister for Transport, David Michael in February.

Members from SASTR will be at the March Toodyay Farmers Market so come and hear about the details of our new submission to the Government.

Contact us on [info@sastr.com.au](mailto:info@sastr.com.au) or visit our website: [www.sastr.com.au](http://www.sastr.com.au)

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