

Thought Leadership

'THERE'S A REAL HUMAN BEING IN THIS TRUCK': THE EFFECT OF 'SUICIDE BY TRUCK' ON DRIVERS

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Fear of prompting 'copycats' and a taboo around the topic often mutes discussion of suicide. In the transport sector, however, Australian train drivers are exposed to 'suicide by train' three times a week, and experience suggests heavy vehicle drivers also regularly face similar incidents. So has the time come for government and the wider community to partner with the transport industry to prevent 'suicide by truck' and support the third parties involved?

Hidden Away

There are 150 incidents a year in Australia where people have used trains to end their lives. Until recently, evidence of a similar phenomenon in road transport was anecdotal. 'Suicide by truck' involves third party pedestrians or light vehicle drivers intentionally using the velocity of a truck to end their lives. A bias against findings of death by suicide and the fact that vehicular suicides are removed from the road toll means suicide by truck has remained largely hidden and unaddressed.

One major operator, Toll Group, examined every on-road and driver fatality at its operations over a 10 year period. Among other [findings](#), Toll's research indicated 14 per cent of the fatalities with which it was involved, or one in seven, were confirmed 'suicide by truck'. Confirmation requires a finding by a coroner, police or insurance company, so Toll believes that 14 per cent is likely to be an underestimate. The actual figure may be closer to 20 per cent of all the on-road and driver fatalities that the company experiences.

As with family members and friends who lose loved ones to suicide by truck, the impact on truck drivers can be profound. The collision may expose them to risk of injury and death. In addition to being inadvertently involved in a fatality, drivers are often the first responder on scene. The ongoing psychological effects can include guilt, flashbacks, depression and anxiety.

The trauma for truck drivers can be compounded by media reports that assume the truck driver is at fault before the full facts of the case are known. Similar assumptions are probably less likely to be directed towards train drivers, where the risk of suicide by rail is more widely known and understood. However, train and truck drivers are both human and similar consideration could help truck drivers overcome the trauma of being involved in suicide by truck.

PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM

Surprising Findings

The most striking finding of Toll Group's research for Dr Sarah Jones, General Manager for Road Transport Safety and Compliance, was the frequency of 'suicide by truck' and "the realisation of the emotional trauma that drivers may be carrying by virtue of doing their jobs".

"I've got drivers who have experienced this more than once," she said. "One of them talked about how he had a near miss where the car driver made eye contact with him. The car driver was coming towards him and the truck driver started waving his arms and flashing his lights and honking his horn, trying to send signals that 'hey, there is a real human being here. I'm not a truck, I'm not an extension of this truck. I am a living, breathing human being and what you are about to do involves me'. In that instance the car driver swerved and avoided the collision. We do not yet know how many near-misses our drivers are exposed to."

Taking Action

Toll's research findings posed a dilemma for the company. Toll knew that it could not solve the issue alone and needed external expertise and involvement, but recognised the risk that insensitive or uninformed commentary could lead to 'copycat' incidents.

"So we thought 'what do we do about this?' The obvious first step was talk to people in rail because they've had experience in the area. They've done their research, they know how to report responsibly. We spoke with TrackSAFE and we've entered into a formal partnership arrangement with them, which gives us access to their materials.

"Those materials include what you'd call a resilience component, which is frank with drivers that vehicular suicide is a potential occupational hazard. So we're educating people up front: this is something you may experience in the course of your working life. If you do, these are the kinds of emotions and behaviours you might experience, these are the psychological reasons you'll experience them, and this is the help available to you.

"The second component is supporting people who have experienced suicide by truck, who may be experiencing PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder].

"We also understand that we need the support and expertise of the mental health community, road transport operators, drivers, road safety bodies, media and government agencies if we are going to find a meaningful solution."

Toll's research has instigated a national conversation on suicide by truck. Following Toll's briefing to the National Road Safety Partnership Program (NRSPP) on the research findings, the NRSPP convened a diverse and highly credentialed national working group. The working group is committed to objectively scoping the extent of vehicular suicide, finding collaborative solutions and responsibly raising awareness.

'There is a real human being here...I'm not an extension of this truck. I am a living, breathing human being and what you are about to do involves me.'

For more information, visit nrspp.org.au.

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