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Thought Leadership: Safer vehicles, safer roads: How are your people getting to work?

Introduction

If anyone knows about the importance of safer vehicles in reducing road injuries and fatalities, it would be emergency first responders who deal with road trauma on a daily basis. New research on the personal attitudes of police officers towards vehicle safety put that to the test, with some surprising results.

In Search of Answers

When the head of the NSW Centre for Road Safety told a road police forum that only one third of light vehicles in NSW had a 5-star ANCAP rating, it got the audience's attention. Around the same time, two local Highway Patrol officers were injured in separate road crashes on their way to work.

Those events, and the fact 5-star safety ratings are mandated for Highway Patrol cars in NSW and the fleet travels 25 million kilometres every year, got NSW Police Snr. Sgt. Mick Timms thinking: "we give people a 5-star rated vehicle when they're at work, but what are they actually driving to work in?"

So the Work Health Safety Officer for Traffic and Highway Patrol Command (THPC) put together a survey of the 1400-strong NSW unit to answer:

- Do our workers and their loved ones have the highest level of occupant protection when driving their own vehicles?
- As frontline road policing specialists exposed to the consequences of road trauma, do our officers have sufficient knowledge of safer vehicles to inform their own judgement when buying a vehicle for themselves or novice drivers in their family?

Road crashes are the leading cause of work-related deaths in Australia, and older vehicles are over-represented in crash statistics. In line with [Safer Systems](#) thinking, safer vehicles reduce the risk of a crash and severity of injury. Analysis of an 18-day Christmas-New Year holiday NSW traffic operation, for example, showed 19 out of 21 passenger vehicles in which a person was killed were not 5-star ANCAP rated; the vehicles' average age was 14 years, well above the national private fleet average.



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Surprising Findings

The online survey asked about the safety level of private vehicles THPC workers use, their attitudes to vehicle safety, the safety of vehicles used by younger drivers in their family, and barriers to accessing safer vehicles. It found:

- More than half (57%) of THPC members drive a private vehicle that is 5-star ANCAP rated.
- When it came to safety features as a factor in the purchasing decision, two thirds (65%) said it was a factor and another 17% said it was the main factor. It was not a factor in almost one fifth of purchases (18%).
- About one third (30%) cited cost as a barrier to purchasing newer, safer vehicles. The private vehicle driven to work is more than 10 years old in one quarter of cases.
- When it comes to younger drivers, children of THPC workers always or mostly drive a 5-star vehicle in 61% of households. The percentage whose children always drive newer vehicles is the same as whose children never or rarely do (36% vs. 35%). For those with children who have purchased or are about to buy their first car, 80% did discuss the importance of vehicle safety features.
- Almost 3% said they were not concerned with vehicle safety. When that figure is applied to the number of licensed vehicles on Australian roads, it equates to more than 500,000 vehicle purchases where safety was not a consideration.



5 Key Survey Findings

- 57% drive a private vehicle that is 5-star rated
- In 61% of households, young drivers always or mostly drive a 5-star vehicle
- Vehicle safety was a factor in deciding what car to buy in 82% of cases
- Cost was a barrier to purchasing newer, safer vehicles for 30% of respondents
- 3% were not concerned with vehicle safety

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Cost a Major Factor

The survey showed cost was a major barrier to purchasing 5-star ANCAP rated vehicles for private use, even in a profession with above-average earnings, Snr. Sgt. Mick Timms said.

He adds that while there are costs for families in purchasing safer cars, costs to society from driving older, less safe cars include hospitalisations, injuries and fatalities. There are also costs to employers, through lost productivity, worker absences, workers compensation, and recruiting and training new staff.

So it is also in employers' best interests to encourage their workforce to choose 5-star ANCAP rated vehicles for their daily commute.

"We're fairly well paid compared to a lot of other industries, but people still have mortgage and other financial pressures and that has certainly been an impediment to more widespread adoption of later model vehicles," said Mick Timms, who has been in the police force since the mid-1980s.

"The most striking comment from a parent was that some 'families have no other option than to simply purchase a vehicle and then pray each night that nothing happens' to their driving aged children.

"I have a teenage daughter who is...learning to drive and looking at purchasing a car. The current costs of living... play a significant factor of purchasing a vehicle for young adults. Most families have no other option than to simply purchase a vehicle they can afford, then pray each night that nothing happens to them...I find myself at the cross roads: do I plunge my family further into debt to purchase a newer car for my daughter that offers the greatest protection or do I try and find the right priced car and pray that nothing happens to her at her most vulnerable stages of life and learning to drive on our over populated roads?"

Source: Response to NSW Police THPC vehicle safety survey

"Aside from the human cost of road trauma, recruiting, training and retaining personnel represents a considerable financial undertaking, so it should therefore be in the interests of all employers to reduce crash severity regardless of whether workers are on or off duty.

"The bottom line is that road safety is work safety and vice versa."

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Choosing Safer Vehicles

Mick Timms believes survey outcomes illustrate the need for meaningful community education on the importance of vehicle safety, and that such efforts need to reflect what happens in real-world scenarios. An [ANCAP demonstration](#) in early 2019, for example, used crashed 1998 and 2015 Corollas to illustrate improved safety performance of newer vehicles. The offset, rather than front-on, impact more accurately reflects what happens in 'real' crashes.

The survey also demonstrated a need for financial incentives for motorists to update to vehicles with improved safety features, particularly for younger drivers. Government needs to take a leading role in reducing the age of the used vehicle fleet, as it attempted to do with the 'cash for clunkers' scheme almost a decade ago, and perhaps insurers could offer subsidies for safer vehicles, as suggested by a survey respondent.

"It can be difficult to convince the community that fatal and serious injury crashes happen to good people and that safe systems are a way for them to reduce crash severity," Mick Timms said. "If there are knowledge gaps among police, this would be reflected in the wider community and would probably be greater.

"Employers concerned with the safety and welfare of their workforce may gain an understanding of their employees' road safety knowledge through this type of survey process and road safety stakeholders might be able to better target awareness campaigns at knowledge gaps.

"The simple message is driving the safest possible vehicle is an effective way to reduce road deaths and serious injuries."

A member of the NSW Police Force since 1987, Senior Sergeant Mick Timms is Work Health Safety-Due Diligence Officer for Traffic and Highway Patrol Command. Specialising in Highway Patrol and road policing for 30 years, he has held a range of operational and management positions.

NSW Police invites organisations to use the survey to understand what their workers are driving to work. This can act as a conversation seed for understanding why safer vehicles matter. For more information or to access the survey, visit nrspp.org.au

