

Article Type 3: Editorial

Editorial: Updating Our Approach to Road Safety

Ann Williamson¹

¹ Emerita Professor, President, Australasian College of Road Safety

<https://doi.org/10.33492/JRS-D-24-2-117653>

Journal of Road Safety

Vol. 35, Issue 2, 2024

During the 20th century, road fatalities steadily increased to peak in the early 1970's, but then plummeted over the next 30 years. Graphs showing this pattern are often included in reports by road authorities and similar organisations. While we should be proud to have arrested this burgeoning public health problem over the past decade or two, numbers of road fatalities have levelled in many countries including Australia and New Zealand, and even increased in recent years. Unfortunately, our Towards Zero targets are looking less likely in the near future.

Why is this happening? Were the striking road safety improvements in the last century the result of solving the easy problems so now we must tackle the hard ones?

The introduction of the Safe System approach in the early 2000's was an attempt to change thinking from acceptance of road trauma to a 'vision zero' and to put forward strategies about how best to improve road safety. The approach recognises the fallibility of road users and the need for the road system to be designed to minimise the consequences of crashes in terms of deaths and serious injury. The approach is now used widely in Europe, and many other parts of the world including Australasia (ITF, 2022).

Unfortunately, however, evidence on the impact of Safe System on road safety outcomes is lacking. In Australia, Mooren, Grzebieta and Job (2011) reviewed the implementation of Safe System in Victoria, NSW and WA and reported that for each jurisdiction: the approach was different and that it was difficult to link any subsequent road safety gains to the adoption of the approach. Furthermore, in terms of road fatalities, most jurisdictions in Australia have shown little improvement over the last decade, suggesting that the Safe System approach is not producing the benefits for road safety that many expect.

A paper in the current issue of this journal sheds some light on potential reasons for the seeming failure of Safe System to achieve its objectives. Green and colleagues asked whether the limitations of the Safe System theoretical approach are not so much in the concepts embodied but a lack of implementation in practice. Their paper describes survey results from nearly 500 road safety practitioners in Victoria and report that one quarter of respondents had not heard of Safe System. Of the road safety practitioners

who were aware of Safe System, only around 45 percent frequently applied the approach and fewer than one-quarter always applied it. Their findings suggest the lack of impact of the Safe System approach may be due to poor implementation. If so, our challenge is to make the Safe System approach more functional in practice.

Another paper in this issue takes a different perspective. Mooren and Shuey trace the origins and the history of the Safe System, calling for it to be broadened to include a systems-focussed approach. Systems thinking approaches incorporate ideas from workplace and aviation and acknowledge the role of latent risk conditions which must be addressed to achieve the improvements in road safety we all seek. In their paper, the heavy vehicle transport system is used as an example of how such an enhanced, system-focussed Safe System approach can be developed.

This paper is timely as it complements the Policy Position paper recently developed by the [Australasian College of Road Safety on A new systems thinking approach to road safety](#). The Policy Position paper argues for building on the Safe System through broadening perspectives on strategies to improve road safety. The proposed new approach recognises that the road traffic system is a complex set of interacting components that include other aspects of society, not just those related to roads and acknowledges that the control and influence required to reduce road trauma may be found in any of these components. For example, management of the problem of driver fatigue requires management of the hours of service for people working irregular hours and so involves work-related as well as road authorities and managers. The new approach also recognises that road user errors and crashes can be created by these interacting components so in designing and operating the road system we must respond to the capacities and strengths as well as the limitations of the human user. A primary requirement of a truly safe system is that must be usable.

This proposed new approach to road safety has demonstrated effectiveness in workplace safety and in other transport modes, especially aviation and rail. It is the update we need to reach our Towards Zero road safety targets and prevent people being killed and injured on our roads.



References

ITF. (2022). *The Safe System Approach in Action*. OECD Publishing.

Mooren, L., Grzebieta, R., & Job, S. (2011). Safe System – Comparisons of this Approach in Australia. Paper Presented at the Australasian College of Road Safety National Conference - A Safe System – Making It Happen! Melbourne, September, 2011, 1.