AA Road Safety Review 2026



Tracking New Zealand's road safety progress over the last decade.



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About the data

This report has been produced by the New Zealand Automobile Association (Incorporated).

This review examines ten years of New Zealand road safety data, covering the period from 2016 to 2025 inclusive. To provide a clearer picture of long-term trends, most crash statistics are presented as three-year periods (2016–18, 2019–21 and 2022–24), followed by the most recent individual year (2025).

Using three-year averages helps smooth out normal year-to-year fluctuations and reduces the impact of unusually high or low years. This makes it easier to see whether road safety outcomes are genuinely improving, worsening or remaining stable over time.

Many statistics are presented on a per 100,000 population basis rather than as raw numbers. This accounts for New Zealand's growing population and allows fairer comparisons over time.

This report uses population-based measures to analyse crash trends. The AA also examined trends using vehicle kilometres travelled (VKT), a measure of how much driving occurs on New Zealand roads. Access to VKT data is delayed as it is released later than population data, but it shows very similar trends, confirming that per capita measures (deaths, or serious injuries per 100,000 people) provide a reliable and more timely basis for the analysis.

Unless otherwise stated, crash data has been sourced from official datasets, including the Crash Analysis System (CAS), Ministry for Cities, Environment, Regions and Transport data, and Official Information Act requests.

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New Zealand showed in 2025 that a significantly lower road toll is achievable.

It was a record-breaking year, with the lowest rate of road deaths in more than a century. While one year alone is too short to know whether this marks a lasting turning point or a temporary improvement, the results demonstrate that substantially less harm on our roads is possible.

There won't be just one reason for this improvement. Road safety outcomes are shaped by many factors working together over time, and it is never possible to know with absolute certainty why deaths fall in a particular year. However, there are good reasons to believe long-term investments and interventions are making a difference. Some state highways that have been upgraded or replaced over the last 15 years have delivered significant reductions in crashes. Police have dramatically increased alcohol testing on New Zealand roads recently, helping deter one of the most dangerous risk factors in fatal crashes. Modern vehicles also provide far better protection in a crash than those of previous generations. The AA believes all of these factors are likely contributing to lower death rates.

At the same time, this report highlights why there is no room for complacency. While deaths fell to historic lows, serious injuries showed much less progress. Significant differences remain between regions, road users and crash types.

The AA has launched this Annual Road Safety Review because road safety matters to our Members and to New Zealand as a whole. Large amounts of crash data are published every year, but can be difficult to understand and interpret. By bringing key information together in one place, and highlighting where progress is being made and where challenges remain, we hope to create informed discussion about road safety and help shape actions that continue reducing harm.

Road safety is one of New Zealand's biggest causes of injury, but it is also one of the most preventable. Fewer crashes mean fewer families and communities experiencing tragedy, lower ACC and healthcare costs, and less demand on emergency services.

Sustained progress will require individual responsibility, effective enforcement and a transport system designed to protect people when mistakes occur.

Dylan Thomsen
AA Communications, Research & Road Safety Manager



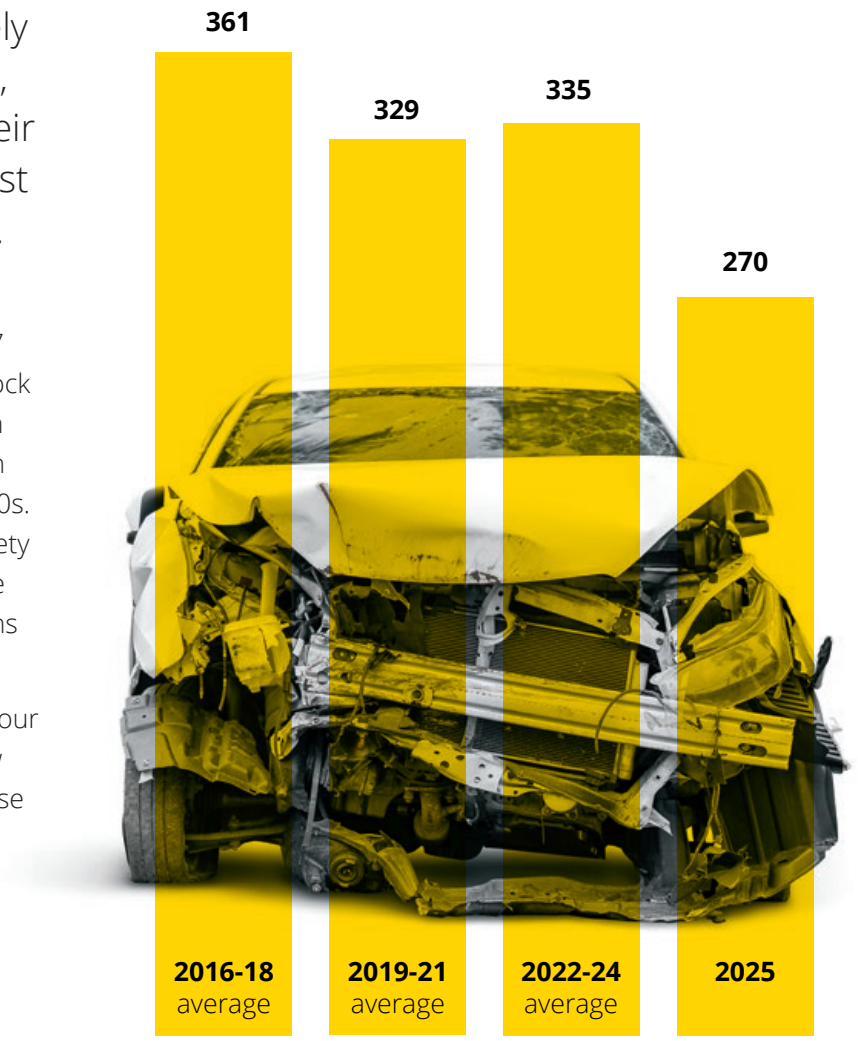
1

Road deaths
Ngā matenga i runga huarahi

The road toll moved decisively in the right direction in 2025, with death rates falling to their lowest level of not just the last decade, but since the 1920s.

Road deaths in New Zealand have been on a steady downward trend since 1987 and the difference since then would shock many people. The rate of road deaths in 2025 is about a quarter of what it was in the 1980s and half that of the early 2000s. To put that in real terms, if our road safety had not improved since the 1980s there would have been more than 1000 deaths in 2025 instead of 270.

We have made substantial progress on our road toll but, at the same time, we know that New Zealand still suffers much worse harm from crashes than many similar countries and has the potential to save many more lives each year.



A closing gap with Australia

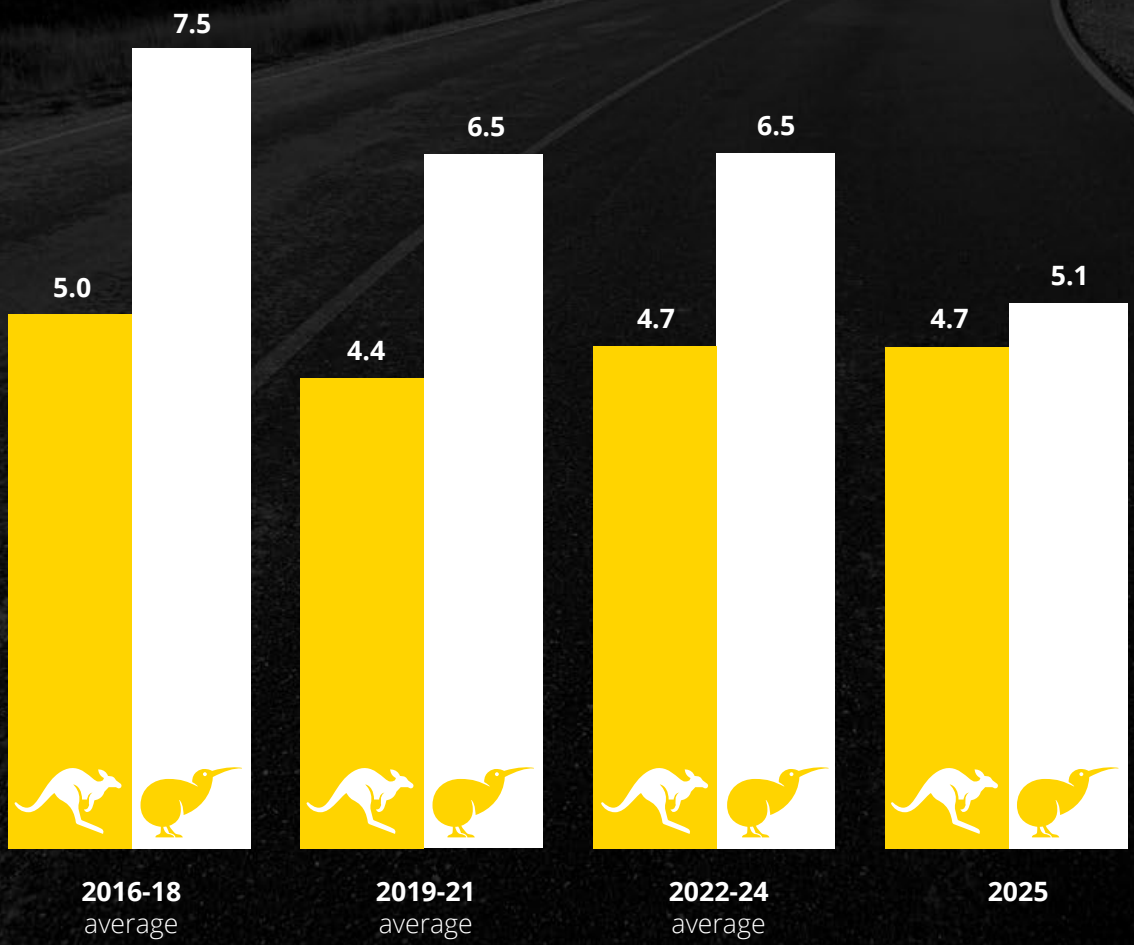
New Zealand came close to matching Australia's road death rate in 2025, something that has not occurred since 1983.

For more than four decades, New Zealand has consistently recorded a higher road toll than Australia on a population-adjusted basis. While the gap has fluctuated over time, Australia has generally maintained a clear advantage, including through most of the past decade.

Some European countries achieve road death rates that are significantly lower again, often around half those of Australia and New Zealand. While these countries provide valuable lessons, the AA considers Australia to be the most meaningful benchmark for New Zealand. The two countries share many similarities, including high levels of car ownership, large rural road networks, comparable living standards and similar driving cultures.

The narrowing of the gap in 2025 is an encouraging sign. It suggests there is no reason New Zealand cannot achieve road safety outcomes at least as good as Australia's in the years ahead.

Road Deaths per 100,000 population
Compared to Australian fatalities



2

Serious injuries
Ngā wharanga kino

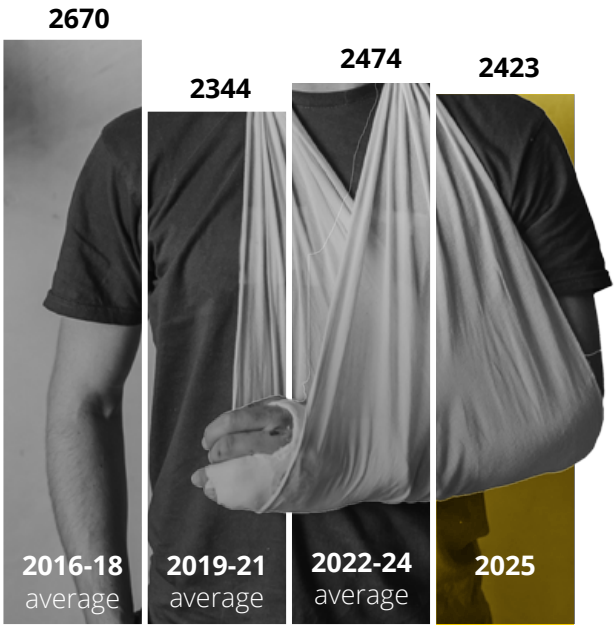
While road deaths reached record lows in 2025, there was no similar breakthrough in serious injuries.

The rate of serious injuries per 100,000 people has remained relatively stable for much of the past decade, falling noticeably less than road deaths.

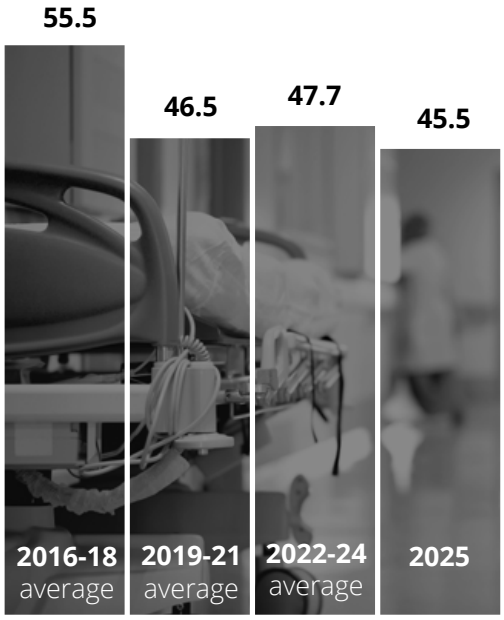
This pattern has been observed in many countries. Improvements in vehicle safety, road engineering and emergency medical care mean crashes that might once have been fatal are increasingly survivable. However, the impact forces involved in a serious crash can still cause life-changing injuries.

Serious injuries cover a wide range of harm, from traumatic brain injuries and paralysis through to fractures, internal injuries, severe lacerations and other injuries requiring hospital treatment.

The burden of road trauma extends far beyond road deaths. Every year, thousands of New Zealanders require treatment in already stretched hospitals and tens of thousands require ACC support after being injured on the road.



Serious injuries
(Total)



Serious injuries
(per 100,000 population)



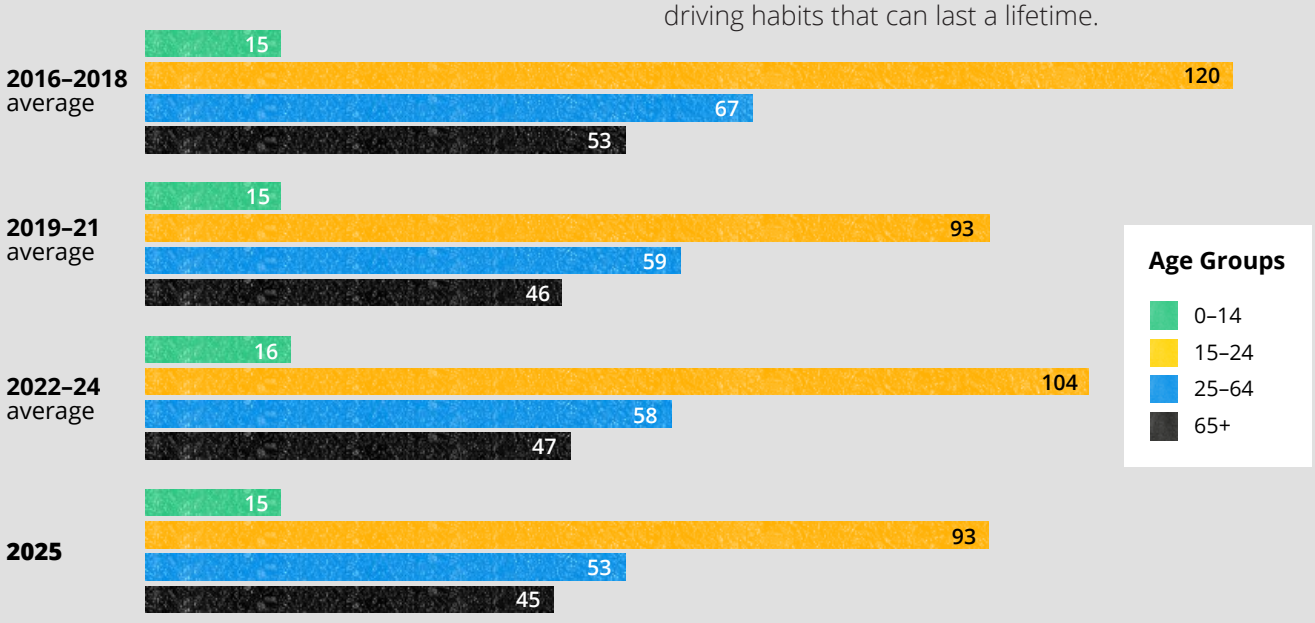
3

Age groups
Ngā Whakarōpūtanga ā-Pakeke

Most age groups have experienced reductions in death and serious injury rates over the past decade. The exception is children under 15, where rates have remained largely unchanged but they also suffer the least harm on our roads.

Young adults remain New Zealand's highest-risk age group on the road. The death and serious injury rate for 15-24 year olds is nearly twice that of any other age group.

This highlights the continued importance of young adults as a road safety priority. Improving the skills, knowledge and behaviours of drivers under 25 has the potential to reduce harm among New Zealand's highest-risk road users while also establishing safer driving habits that can last a lifetime.



Deaths and serious injuries by age group
(per 100,000 population in that age group)

Road safety's biggest age challenge

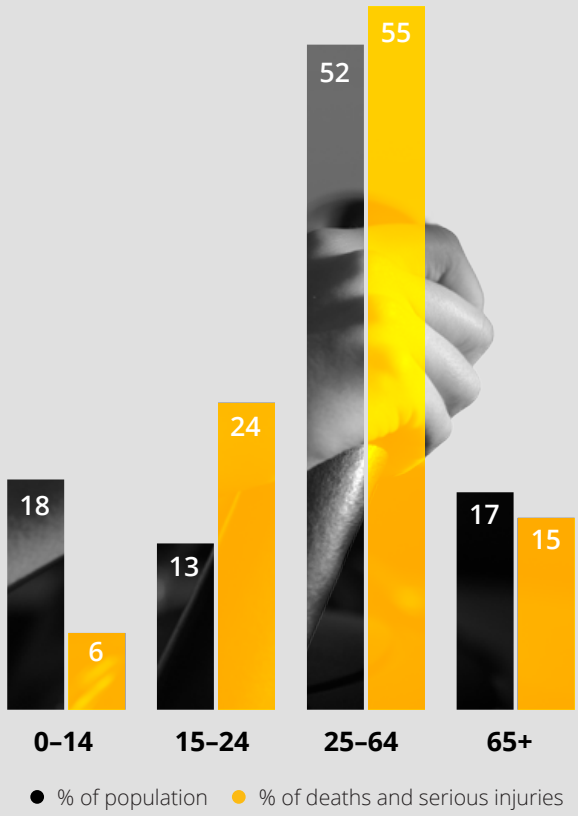
Although 15-24 year olds made up less than 13% of the population in 2025, they accounted for almost one-quarter of all road deaths and serious injuries.

The elevated risk faced by young adults is likely to reflect a combination of factors including inexperience, greater exposure to high-risk situations, higher rates of distraction and risk-taking, and the fact that many are still developing driving skills and judgement.

A survey undertaken by the AA Research Foundation in 2024 found that one in three young drivers had experienced a crash during their first few years of driving. The survey also found many young drivers admitted to more frequent behaviours known to increase crash risk, including driving while tired, not always wearing a seatbelt, and using or interacting with a mobile phone while driving.

Despite New Zealand largely closing the gap with Australia on road deaths overall in 2025, the road death rate for New Zealanders aged 15-24 remained around 40% higher than that of their Australian counterparts. This suggests that while New Zealand has made significant progress overall, improving safety for young drivers remains a major challenge.

These figures highlight the importance of helping young people become safer drivers. Significant changes to New Zealand's graduated driver licensing system will come into effect in January 2027, with a stronger focus on driver training and building experience before drivers progress through the licensing system.



2025 share of population and deaths and serious injuries by age group



Young drivers face double the risk

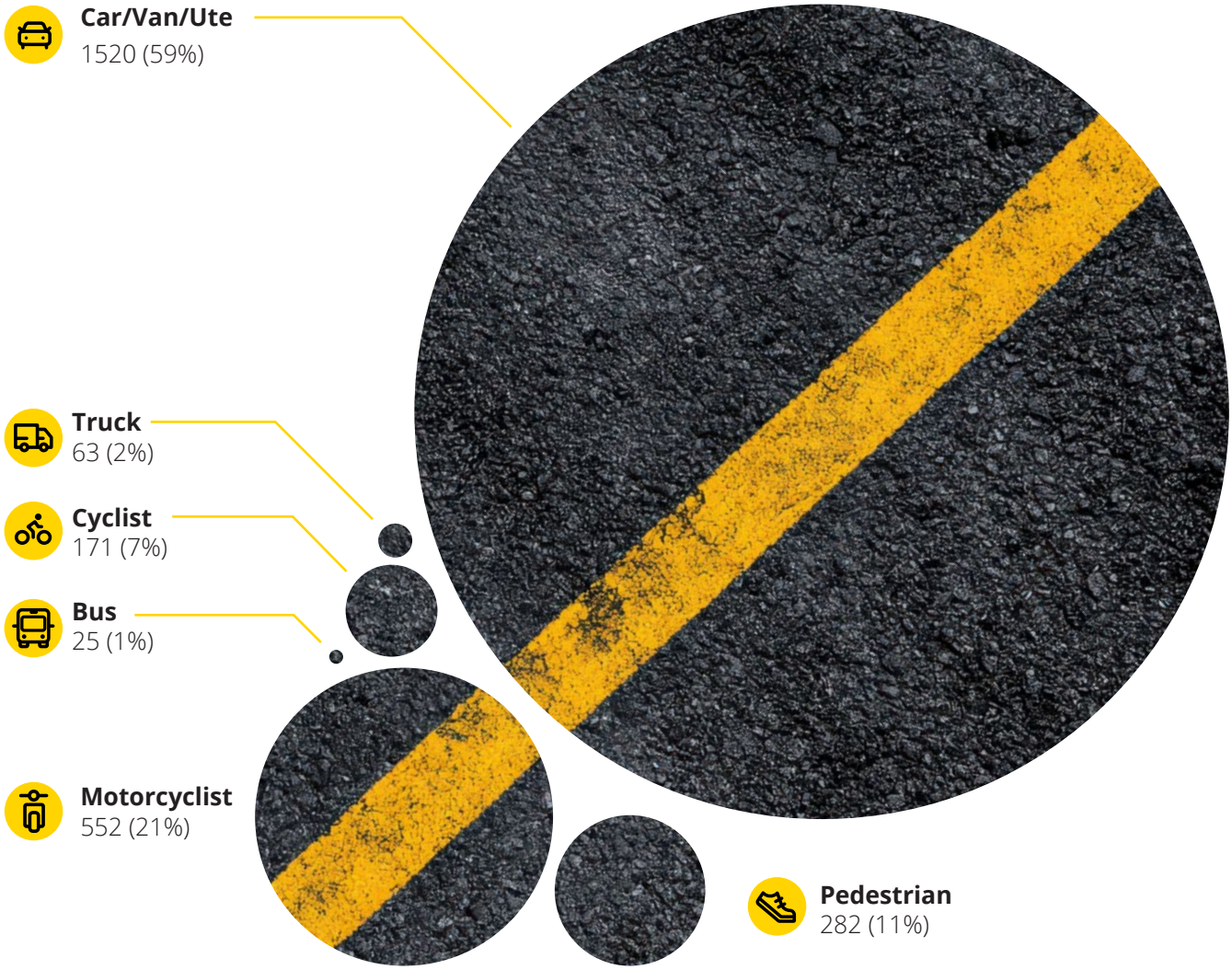
4 Mode of transport
Te momo tūnuku

While road deaths overall reached record lows in 2025, the picture varies considerably between different types of road users.

Most deaths and serious injuries occur to people travelling in cars, vans and utes, followed by motorcyclists, pedestrians and cyclists. By comparison, relatively few people travelling in trucks or buses are killed or seriously injured in crashes.

Most road users have experienced improvements over the past decade. Deaths and serious injuries among occupants of cars, vans and utes fell from an average of 1,853 a year in 2016-18 to 1,520 in 2025. Pedestrians and cyclists have also generally experienced lower levels of harm than a decade ago.

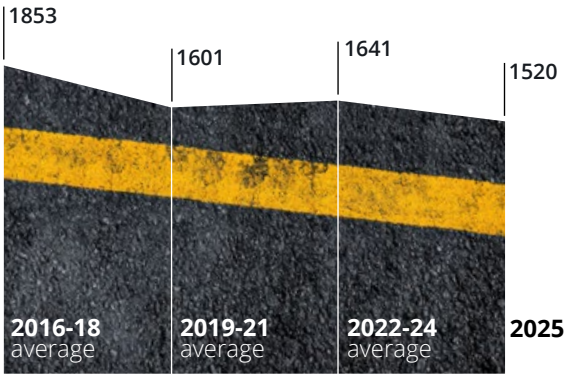
2025 Deaths and serious injuries by mode of transport



Motorcyclists and moped riders stand out as an exception. They accounted for 21% of all road deaths and serious injuries in 2025 despite making up only around 1% of vehicle kilometres travelled. Deaths and serious injuries among motorcyclists were also slightly higher in 2025 than a decade earlier, unlike most other road user groups.

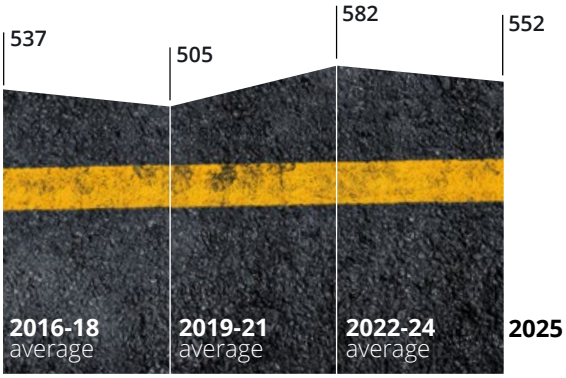
The data highlights that not all road users have benefited equally from New Zealand's road safety improvements. While safer vehicles and roads appear to be reducing harm for many people, motorcyclists remain particularly vulnerable when crashes occur.

Car/Van/Ute



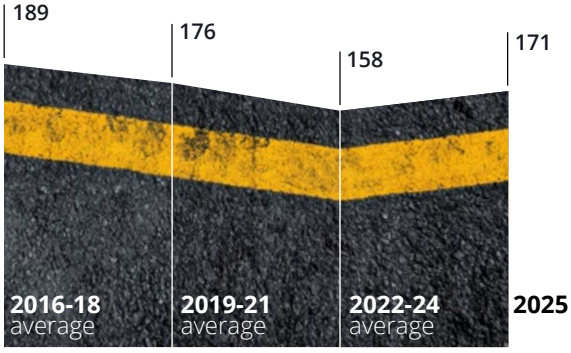
Deaths and serious injuries

Motorcycle/Moped



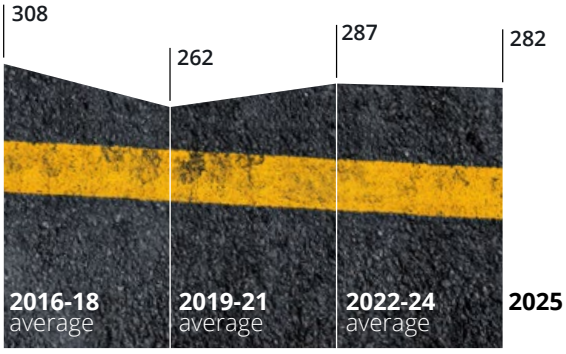
Deaths and serious injuries

Cyclist



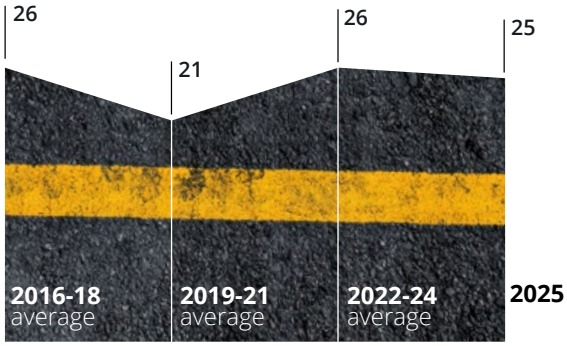
Deaths and serious injuries

Pedestrian



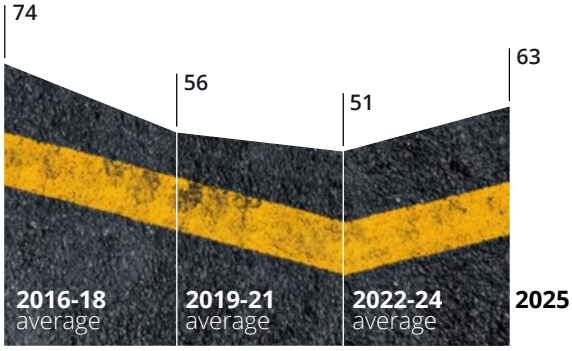
Deaths and serious injuries

Bus



Deaths and serious injuries

Truck



Deaths and serious injuries

5

One in three fatal crashes don't involve extreme behaviour

Crash factors
Ngā āhuatanga tukinga

Most major risk factors moved in the right direction in 2025

One reason New Zealand recorded its lowest road death rate in more than a century is that improvements occurred across most of the factors associated with fatal crashes.

Deaths involving speed, drunk or drugged driving, lack of seatbelts, fatigue and distracted driving all fell significantly in 2025, reaching their lowest levels of the decade. The broad-based nature of these improvements suggests the lower road toll was not driven by a single factor, although increases in Police alcohol testing and speed enforcement in recent years appear to be having an impact in those areas.

While these improvements are to be celebrated, recent research by the AA Research Foundation[1] found that nearly one-third of fatal crashes do not involve reckless or extreme behaviours such as alcohol or drug impairment, excessive speed or failing to wear a seatbelt. Many involve ordinary mistakes or lapses in judgement with devastating consequences.

This highlights the importance of both reducing high-risk behaviour and creating a transport system that is more forgiving when human error occurs.

Note: This section focuses on fatalities rather than serious injuries. Serious injury crashes are less likely to have sufficient information available to reliably determine the role of factors such as speed, impairment, fatigue, distraction and seatbelt use.



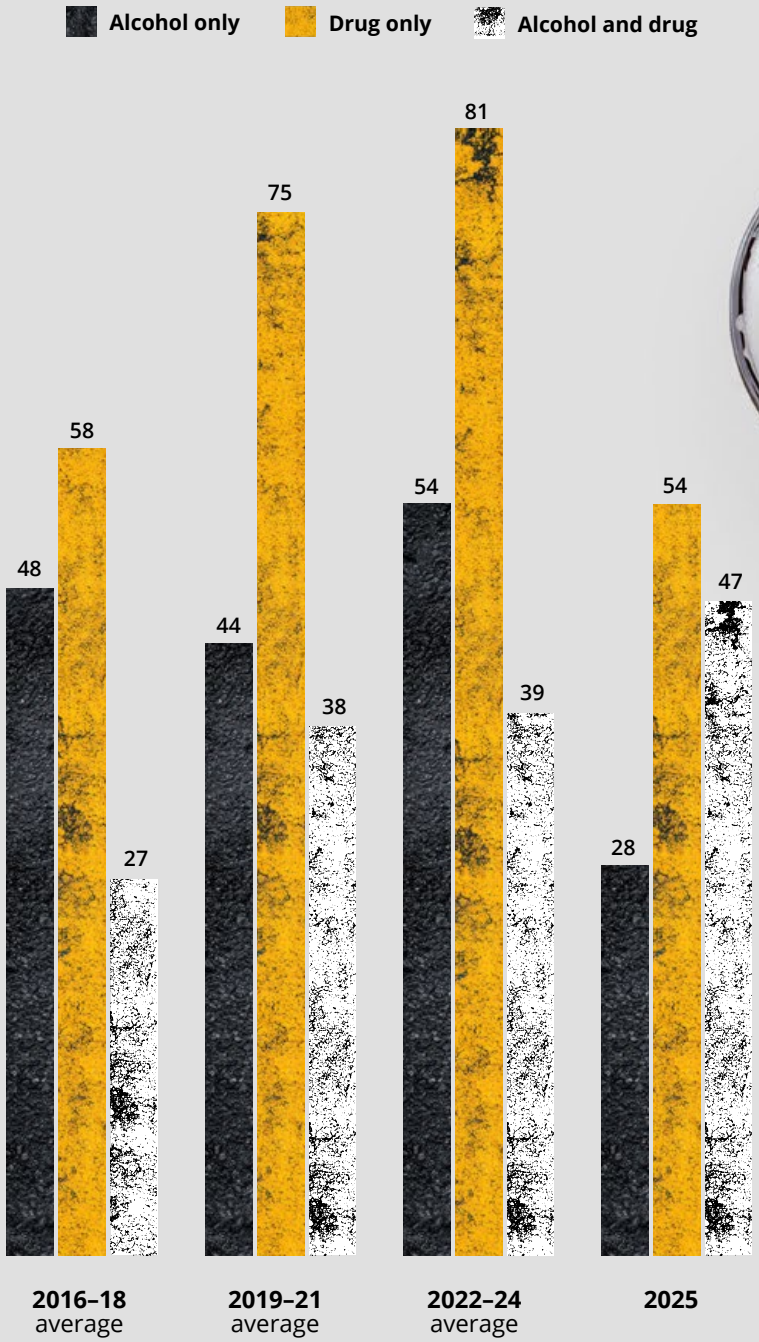
1 Wrightson, S., et al. (2026). *Contributing Factors to Fatal Crashes: A Safe System Analysis of Contextual Factors*. Report prepared for the AA Research Foundation.

Alcohol and drug impairment

After trending upwards for much of the last decade, deaths involving impairment from alcohol or drugs turned around substantially in 2025. The overall total for deaths where a driver or rider was over the alcohol limit or tested positive for drugs dropped 25% from the average of the previous three-years.

With Police alcohol testing at record high levels and roadside drug testing starting to operate across the country in 2026, hopefully these numbers continue to fall even lower.

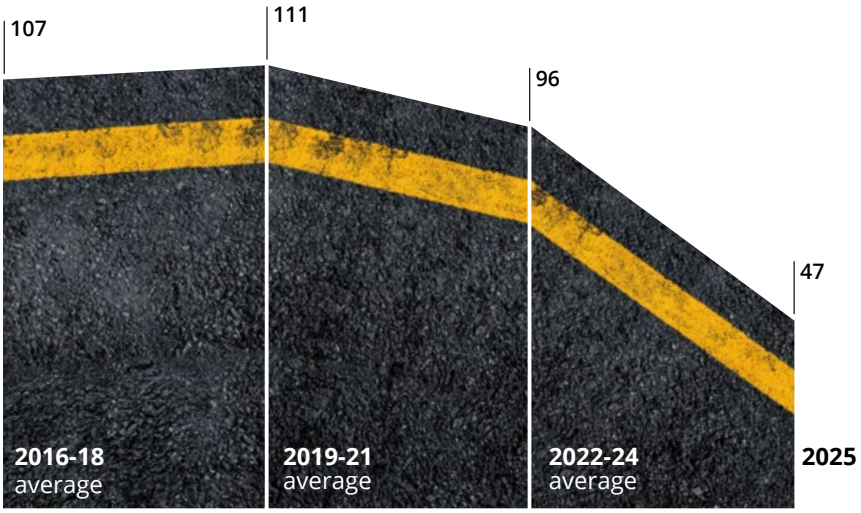
Road deaths that involved an impaired driver or rider





Travelling too fast for the conditions

Deaths involving a vehicle travelling too fast (which can be a vehicle travelling above the speed limit or within the limit but at a speed deemed too fast for the conditions by crash investigators) have more than halved since the late 2010s and fell to their lowest level in the periods examined.



Deaths

9% of drivers don't always buckle up

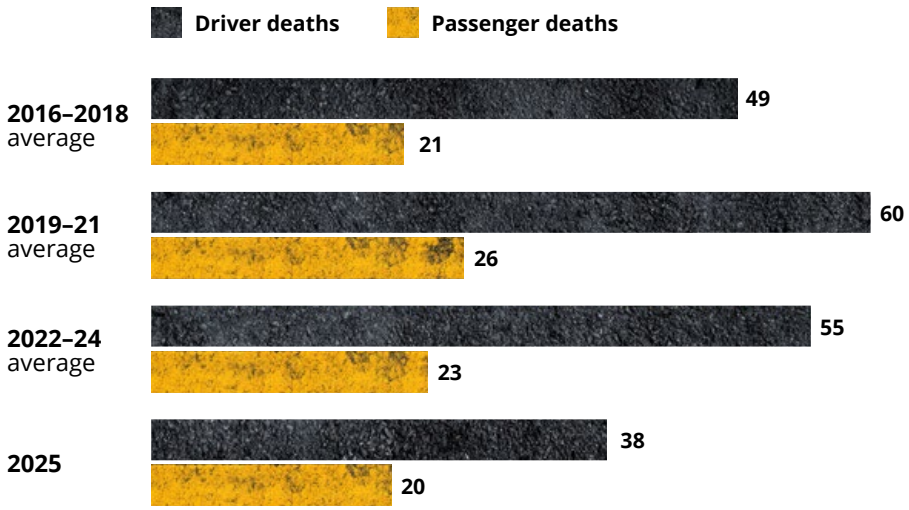
See page 22

Seatbelts not worn

Deaths where a vehicle occupant was not wearing a seatbelt dropped by about 26% in 2025 – mainly among drivers rather than passengers.

Even with the pleasing progress, one in four of the drivers who lost their lives in 2025 was not buckled up and one in three of the passengers killed.

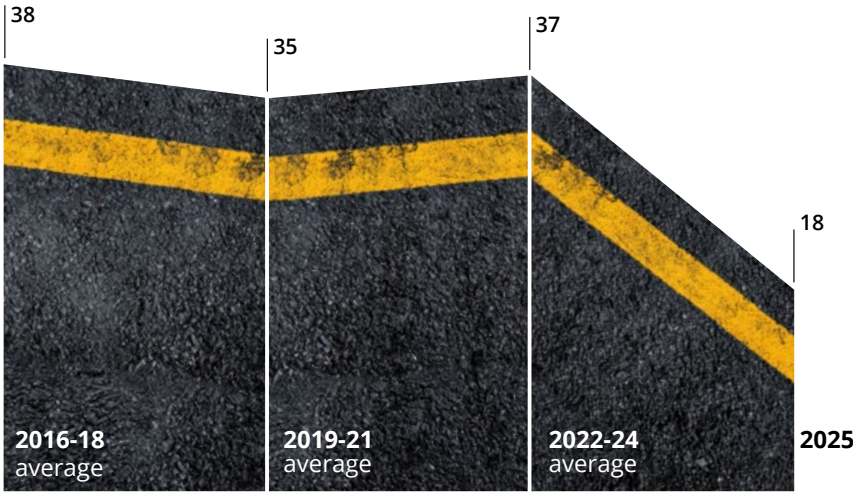
It remains tragic that there were close to 60 deaths last year where a seatbelt was not worn and the simple act of making it click would have saved a number of lives.





Fatigue

Fatigue-related fatalities recorded the largest improvement of any crash factor in 2025, falling to about half the level seen in recent years. It must be recognised that this is one of the more subjective measures to identify in crash investigations and commonly regarded as under-reported in statistics.



Deaths

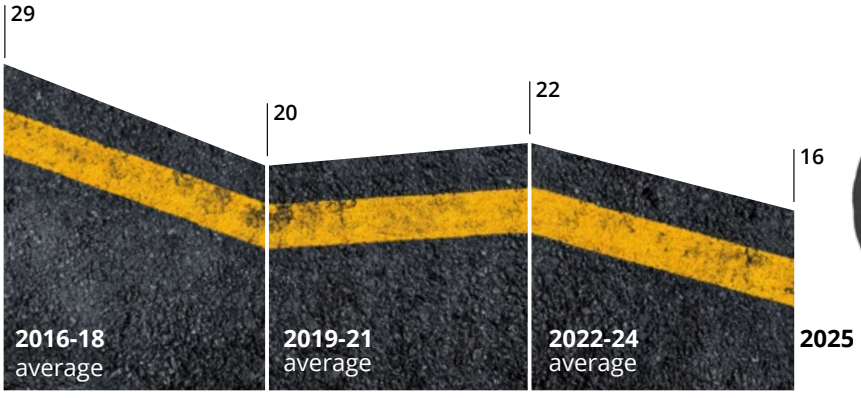
One in five admit checking messages while driving

See page 22

Inattention

Deaths involving driver distraction continued their gradual decline but, like with fatigue, this is harder to identify than many other crash factors and regarded as under-reported in official statistics.

It is interesting that in the survey section later in this report, distraction ranks among the leading perceived causes of crashes and is the most common area drivers say they could improve themselves.



Deaths



6

Regional insight
Ngā tirohanga ā-rohe

What part of the country people live in remains strongly associated with the risk of being killed or seriously injured in a road crash.

Auckland and Wellington recorded the lowest rates of death and serious injury per 100,000 people in 2025, continuing a pattern that has existed throughout the past decade. By contrast, the West Coast's rate of road trauma was more than three times higher. Gisborne, Northland, Manawatū-Whanganui, Hawke's Bay, Taranaki and Waikato also recorded rates more than double those of Auckland and Wellington.

While Auckland has the lowest rate of road trauma on a population basis, its large population means it still recorded the highest number of deaths and serious injuries, accounting for around 23% of the national total.

Most regions have improved over the past decade, although the scale of progress varies considerably. Otago and Southland recorded the largest reductions in deaths and serious injuries per capita, falling by approximately 40% and 36% respectively since 2016-18. Northland and the West Coast also recorded substantial improvements but continue to have some of the highest rates of road trauma in the country.

Only three regions recorded higher rates of death and serious injury in 2025 than in 2016-18: Bay of Plenty, Taranaki and Hawke's Bay, each increasing by around 7%.

Regional rates can fluctuate, particularly in areas with smaller populations, so individual years should be interpreted cautiously. However, the persistent gap between major urban centres and many provincial regions suggests geography remains an important part of New Zealand's road safety challenge. Differences in road types, travel distances and the proportion of travel occurring on high-speed rural roads may all contribute to these regional differences.

The safest places to drive in NZ are our biggest cities

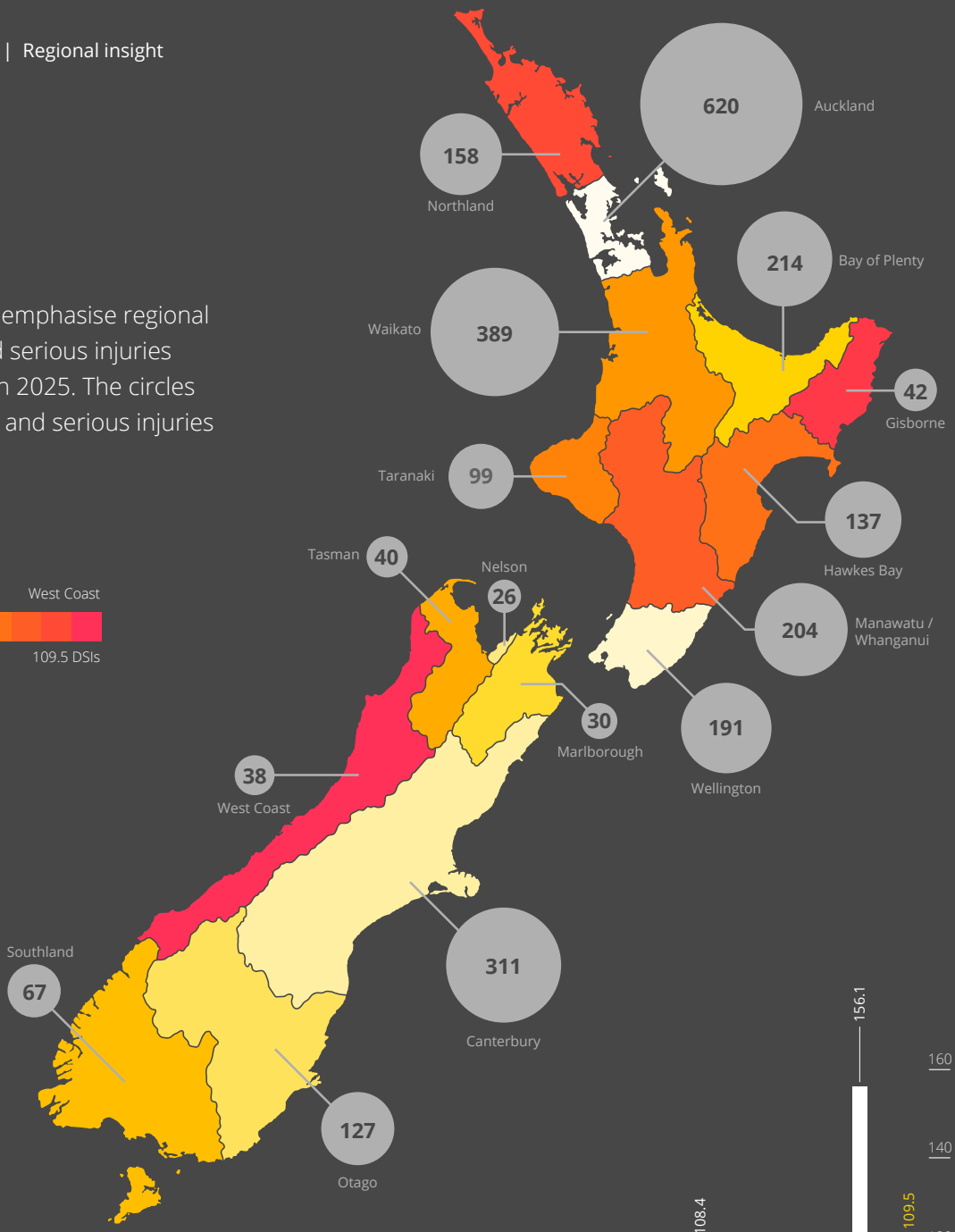
Regional heatmap

Map shading is scaled to emphasise regional differences in deaths and serious injuries per 100,000 population in 2025. The circles highlight the total deaths and serious injuries per region in 2025.

Regional deaths and serious injuries per 100,000 population.

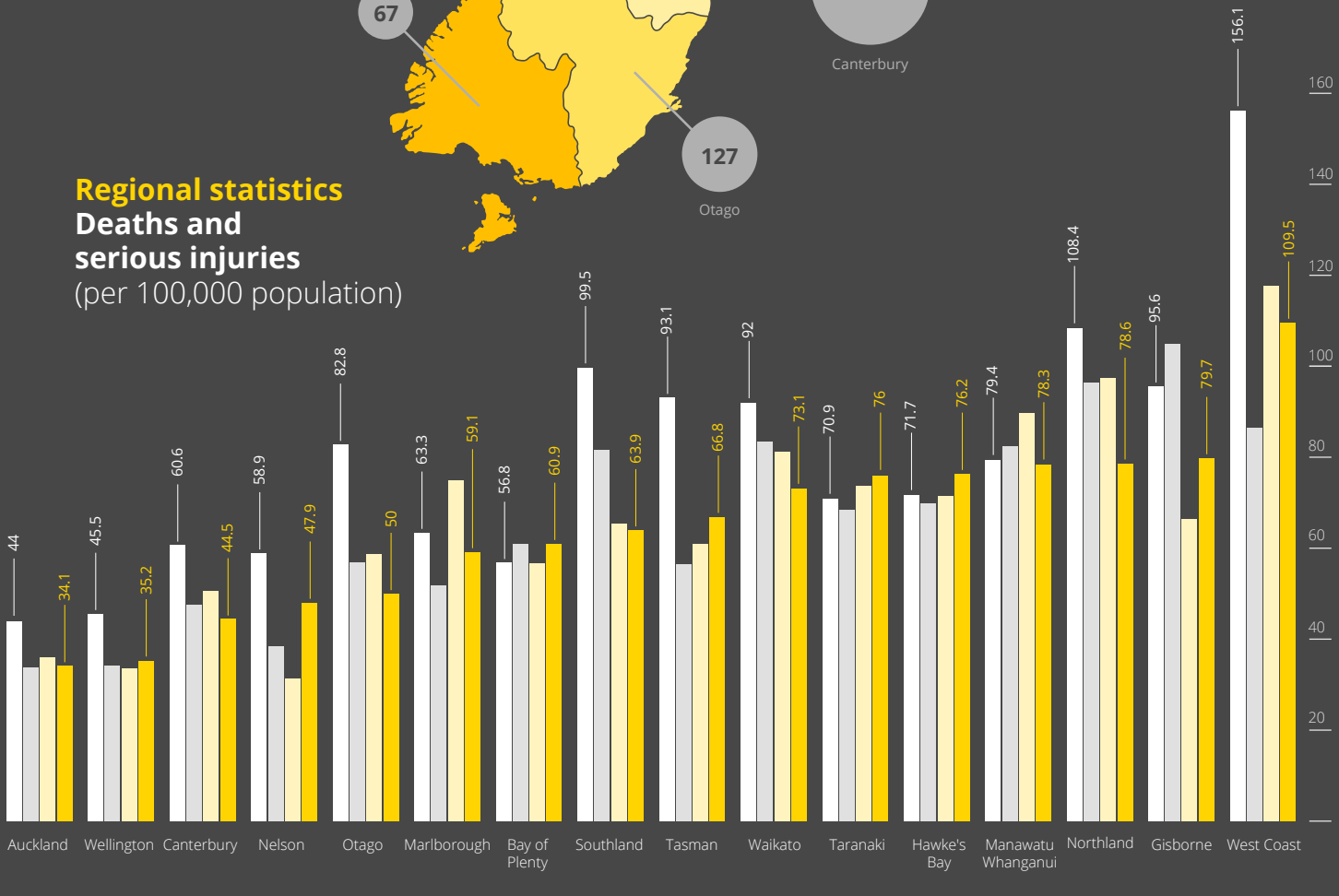
Auckland — West Coast

34.1 DSIs — 109.5 DSIs



Regional statistics

Deaths and serious injuries
(per 100,000 population)



Survey results and research
Ngā hua uiui me te rangahau

Road safety is often discussed in terms of driver behaviour, road design or enforcement. Our survey results suggest most New Zealanders do not see these as competing approaches, but as complementary parts of a safer transport system.

7 out of 8
drivers think they could be better

Reducing distraction is the area drivers most want to improve in

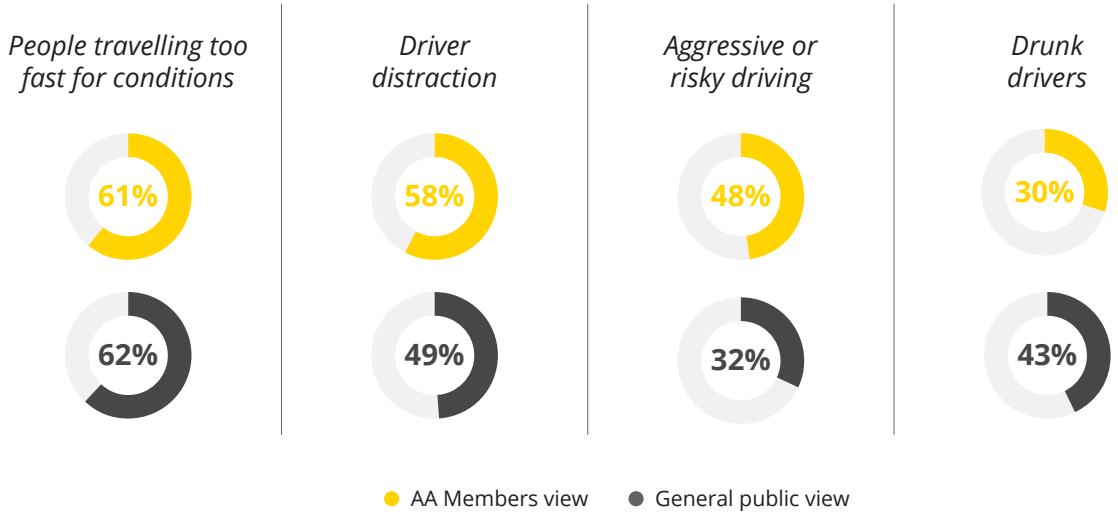


In mid-2026, the AA surveyed nearly 4,700 AA Members and more than 1,000 members of the general public about road safety, driving behaviour and crash experiences. The results showed a high degree of common ground between the two groups.

A clear trend in the results was that younger people admitted to engaging in more risky behaviour like using phones when driving, not wearing seatbelts or being angry or tired behind the wheel. The public survey included a greater proportion of people under 35, which is likely one of the reasons for some differences in responses between the two groups in places.

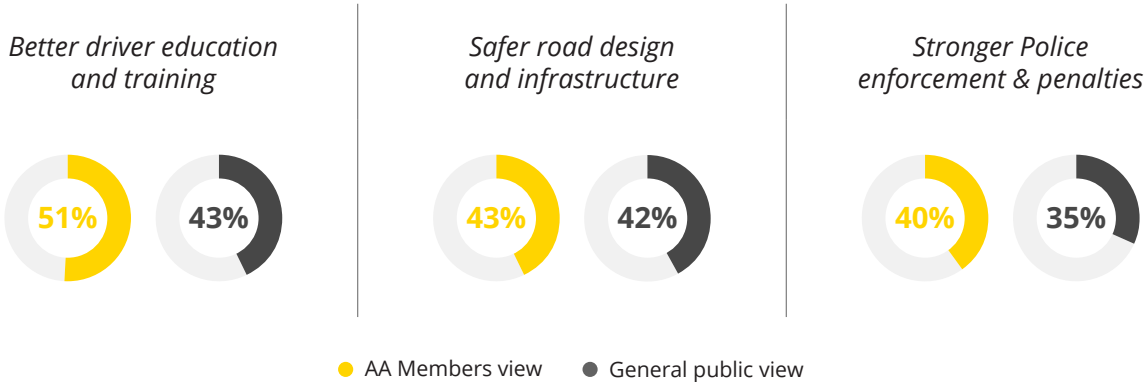
Another notable finding was the degree of self-awareness shown by respondents. Most recognised areas where they could improve their own driving, and very few believed there was nothing they could do better. Distraction emerged repeatedly throughout the survey, seen as both a leading cause of crashes and the most common area where people felt they personally needed to improve.

What do people think the most common causes of crashes are?



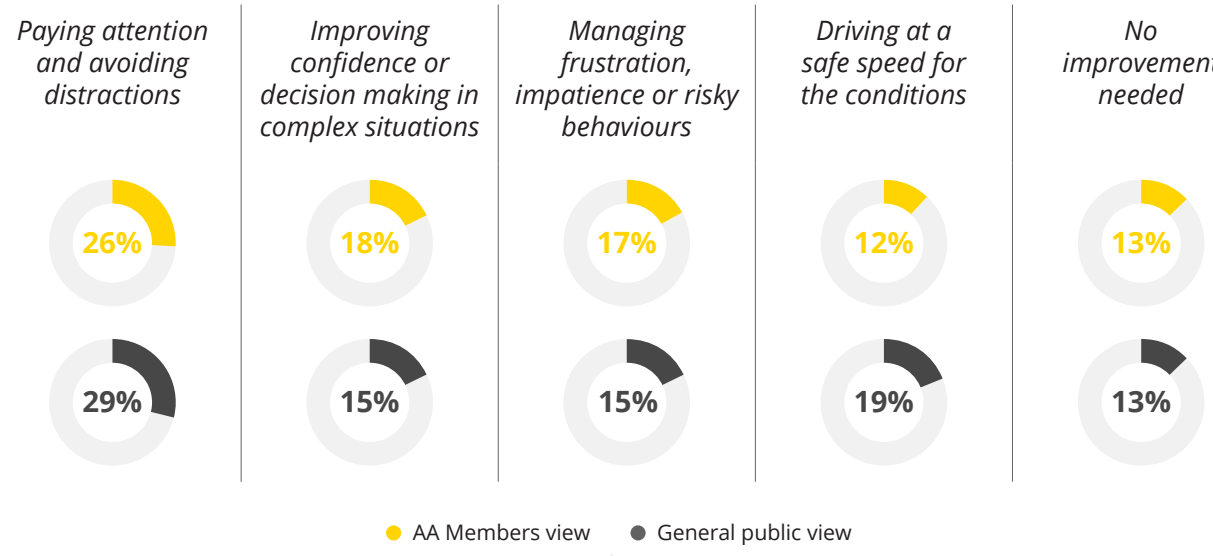
Out of 12 possible options, both groups selected the same top four causes of crashes. AA Members were more likely to identify distraction and risky driving as major contributors while more of the general public identified drunk drivers as a common crash cause.

What would make the biggest difference to road safety?



The public's preferred solutions closely matched what they see as the causes of crashes. Better driver education, safer roads and stronger enforcement were the three measures most often identified as likely to improve road safety.

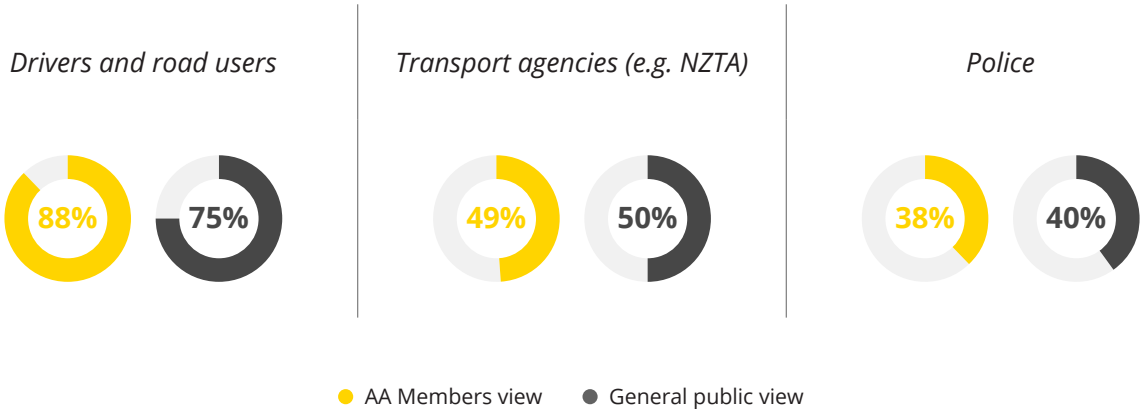
How people think they could improve their own driving



The two groups identified very similar areas for self-improvement. The most noticeable difference was speed, with more members of the general public identifying it as an area where they could improve.

Perhaps the most encouraging finding was that only around one in eight respondents believed there was nothing they needed to improve about their driving.

Who has the greatest responsibility for road safety?



People were asked to pick up to three options from a list of six for who had the greatest responsibility for road safety. Both groups clearly identified drivers and road users as having the greatest responsibility for road safety. While respondent support for the role of transport agencies and Police was similar, AA Members were particularly likely to emphasise how individuals choose to drive and behave on the road.

Road users see themselves as having the greatest responsibility for road safety



What behaviours do people admit doing themselves?

While respondents clearly recognised the importance of safe driving, many also admitted engaging in behaviours that increase crash risk within the last four weeks.

	AA Members	General public
Driven above the speed limit on local roads	**57%**	47%
Driven above the speed limit on open roads or motorways	**54%**	45%
Driven while angry, upset or emotionally distracted	**26%**	30%
Looked at messages on their phone while driving	**20%**	22%
Driven while so tired they struggled to stay awake	**7%**	14%
Scrolled social media or apps while driving	**4%**	10%
Talked on a hand-held phone while driving	**4%**	11%
Driven not wearing a seatbelt	**3%**	9%
Driven while taking medications that may have affected driving	**3%**	9%
Carried passengers with no seatbelts	**2%**	8%
Driven when thought above alcohol limit	**2%**	6%
Driven within an hour of using cannabis	**1%**	6%
Driven after using drugs other than cannabis	**0%**	6%

The public survey results were generally higher across most behaviours. Some of this difference may reflect the younger age profile of that sample.

The findings show risky behaviours remain relatively common. Around one in five people admitted looking at messages while driving, while one in seven people in the public survey admitted driving while so tired they struggled to stay awake and about one in 10 scrolling social media, talking on the phone or not wearing a seatbelt.

Near misses and minor collisions

How common are near misses and minor collisions?

In the past 12 months, the proportion of people who had a near miss or minor collision varied by how they travel.

	AA Members		General public	
	Near miss	**Minor collision**	**Near miss**	**Minor collision**
Car, ute or van	**80%**	17%	**64%**	22%
Walking	**52%**	16%	**42%**	18%
Bike or e-bike	**56%**	16%	**49%**	28%
Motorcycle or moped	**61%**	12%	**56%**	46%
E-scooter	**40%**	10%	**55%**	31%

A near miss was defined as when someone almost had a collision with a person, vehicle or object, but it was avoided at the last moment.

A minor collision was defined as a collision with a person, vehicle or object that resulted in no injuries and only minor or no damage to vehicles.

For walking, cycling, e-scootering and motorcycling people were also asked if they nearly fell for near misses or fell for minor collisions.

Near misses when driving

80% of AA Members who drove reported at least one near miss while driving in the past 12 months. This included 58% who reported at least one near miss with another vehicle, and 20% with another road user (e.g. a cyclist, scooter rider or pedestrian). For the general public, 64% reported at least one near miss while driving, with 43% reporting at least one near miss with another vehicle and 14% with another road user.

The most common locations for driving near misses with other vehicles or road users were when driving on roads in between intersections (35% of AA Members and 29% of the public) or at intersections (30% of AA Members and 31% of the public), followed by at a roundabout (18% of AA Members and 22% of the public).

What do drivers think caused their most recent near miss with another road user?

Drivers who had a near miss with another road user or vehicle were asked what factors they think caused the most recent incident, whether through their own actions, the other road user, or both.

Factor identified in near miss	AA Members	General public[2]
Someone not seeing another road user	75%	77%
Someone misjudging speed, distance or movement	65%	68%
Someone making an unexpected movement	66%	67%
Someone being distracted	40%	47%
Unclear right of way or failure to give way	49%	53%
Unlawful manoeuvre (e.g. running red light)	42%	41%
Someone travelling too fast	38%	44%

Based on people who drove and reported a near miss with another road user or vehicle in the past 12 months. AA Members n=2,807 (±1.8 percentage points); general public n=453 (±4.6) Margins of error are percentage points at the 95% confidence interval.

The two surveys produced similar results for most identified contributors to near misses. Somebody failing to see another road user, and/or somebody misjudging speed, distance or movement or making an unexpected movement were the top three factors.

The most commonly identified factors are typical of everyday errors of perception and judgement, rather than deliberate rule breaking. This fits with other findings in the report: extreme or reckless behaviour is involved in many severe crashes, but not all of them. Many crashes stem from ordinary mistakes, poor judgement or lapses in attention. The AA Research Foundation's 2017 Serious Injury Crashes study[3] shows this is especially true for less serious crashes.

2 Results for the public survey are indicative only due to the smaller sample size for how many respondents had a near miss.
3 Mackie, H., et al. (2017). *Serious injury crashes: How do they differ from fatal crashes? What is the nature of injuries resulting from them?* Report prepared by Mackie Research, The University of Auckland, and TERNZ for the AA Research Foundation.



Near misses when walking

Over half (52%) of AA Members who walked reported at least one near miss while walking in the past 12 months. This included 11% who reported at least one near miss with a vehicle and 17% with another road user (e.g. another pedestrian, cyclist or e-scooter rider). For the general public who walked, 42% reported at least one near miss, with 10% reporting at least one near miss with a vehicle and 11% with another road user.

For the most recent near miss with other road users, incidents were most commonly with a car (45% of AA Members and 57% of the public), followed by e-scooters (37% of AA Members and 29% of the public) and with cyclists (33% of AA Members and 25% of the public).

Most recent near miss/fall while walking was with...	AA Members	General public[4]
Car, ute or van	45%	57%
E-scooter rider	37%	29%
Cyclist or e-bike rider	33%	25%
Another pedestrian	7%	10%
Bus	3%	11%
Mobility scooter	2%	3%
Motorcycle or moped	2%	4%
Truck	1%	8%
Other	1%	0%

4 Results for the public survey are indicative only due to the smaller sample size for how many respondents had a near miss.

Based on people who reported at least one near miss with another road user or vehicle in the past 12 months while walking. AA Members n=811 (±3.4); general public n=114 (±9.2). Margins of error are percentage points at the 95% confidence interval.

Percentages total to more than 100% due to people being able to select more than one type of road user being involved in a single incident.



Near misses while riding a bike or e-bike

56% of AA Members who cycled reported at least one near miss in the past 12 months. This included 28% who reported at least one near miss with another vehicle and 14% with another road user (e.g. a pedestrian, another cyclist or an e-scooter rider). For the public who cycled, 49% reported at least one near miss, with 18% reporting at least one near miss with another vehicle and 13% with another road user.

Among the near misses that people had while cycling, they were most commonly with a car (73% of AA Members and 61% of the public) followed by another cyclist (19% of AA Members and 20% of the public). Near misses with pedestrians (13% and 14%) and e-scooter riders (7% and 16%) were less common.

Most recent near miss while cycling was with...	AA Members	General public[5]
Car, ute or van	73%	61%
Another cyclist or e-bike rider	19%	20%
Pedestrian	13%	14%
E-scooter rider	7%	16%
Truck	5%	12%
Bus	5%	14%
Other	2%	4%
Motorcycle or moped	1%	10%
Mobility scooter	0%	6%

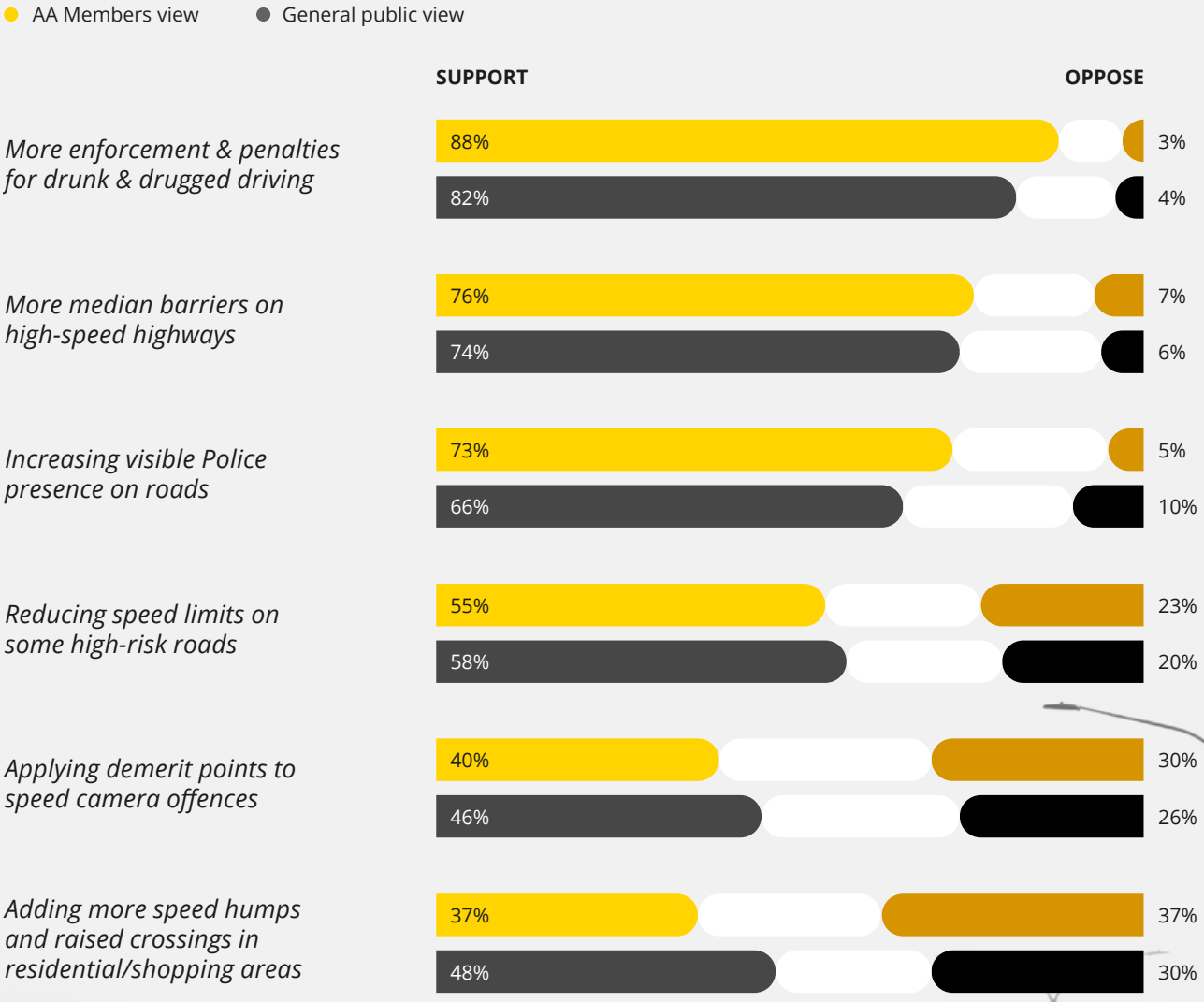
5 Results for the public are indicative only due to the smaller sample size for how many respondents had a near miss.

Based on people who reported at least one near miss with another road user or vehicle in the past 12 months while cycling. AA Members n=383 (±5.0); general public n=51 (±13.7). Margins of error are percentage points at the 95% confidence interval.

Percentages total to more than 100% due to people being able to select more than one type of road user being involved in a single incident.

Views on specific road safety actions

When asked about a variety of possible road safety actions, AA Members and the public both have the highest support for tougher action on drunk and drugged driving and the installation of more median barriers on high-speed highways. Adding more speed bumps and raised crossings in residential/ shopping areas was the most divisive option – particularly among AA Members where support and opposition were equal.



About the survey

AA Member survey

- In the field from 23 July to 17 August 2026.
- Sent to a random sample of 62,366 AA Members as well as 3,666 members of the AA Member Voices Panel (66,032 invited in total)
- 4,667 responded nationally, a response rate of approximately 7.1%
- Results are weighted to AA Member demographics (age, gender and location).

General public survey

- In the field from 10 to 24 August 2026.
- Completed online by 1,026 New Zealanders aged 18 and over from a research panel (Pure Profile), with quotas set to match the New Zealand population by age, gender and location.
- Results are unweighted.

Group	AA Members[6]	General public[6]
All respondents	4,667 (±1.4)	1,026 (±3.1)
Drove a car, ute or van	4,612 (±1.4)	950 (±3.2)
Walked	3,456 (±1.7)	637 (±3.9)
Rode a bike or e-bike	1,088 (±3.0)	197 (±7.0)
Rode a motorcycle or moped	308 (±5.6)	50 (±13.9)
Rode an e-scooter	174 (±7.4)	64 (±12.3)
Drivers who had a near miss with another vehicle or road user (location and causes)	2,807 (±1.8)	453 (±4.6)
Walkers who had a near miss with another vehicle or road user	811 (±3.4)	114 (±9.2)
Cyclists who had a near miss with another vehicle or road user	383 (±5.0)	51 (±13.7)

6 n (margin of error at 95% confidence)

Reckless and extreme behaviour

When many people think of severe crashes they think of things like drunk or drugged driving, people fleeing Police and people travelling at extreme speeds.

Those things absolutely feature in severe crashes, and are often what attracts attention in the media, but it is not the entire story.

The AA Research Foundation commissioned in depth analysis of nearly all fatal crashes in New Zealand in 2024 and one of the things examined was what proportion of crashes involved 'reckless or extreme behaviour'[7].

The researchers created criteria for deeming a crash to be 'reckless or extreme' and they were:

Reckless/extreme behaviour

Involved road users doing things like two or more illegal behaviours or being above the alcohol limit, having no licence, being 20km/h+ above the limit

Illegal behaviour

Involved road users doing one thing like breaching licence conditions, lower level speeding or the presence of a drug that affects driving

Mistakes or system failures

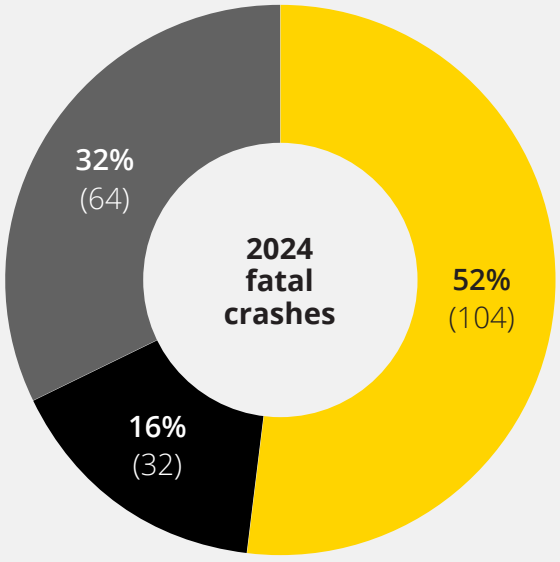
Involved road users making an error like drifting out of their lane or failing to see someone else on the road

Of the 200 fatal crashes analysed from 2024:

52% involved **'reckless/ extreme behaviour'**

16% involved **'illegal behaviour'**

32% involved **'mistakes or system failures'** alone



7 Wrightson, S., et al. (2026). *Contributing Factors to Fatal Crashes: A Safe System Analysis of Contextual Factors.* Report prepared for the AA Research Foundation.

What could New Zealand do next in road safety?

The record-low road toll of 2025 shows lower road trauma is achievable. The question now is not whether further improvements are possible, but where the next gains are most likely to come from.

We need to continue the traditional measures of upgrading high-risk roads, having effective enforcement and penalties for high-risk behaviours and encouraging better vehicles and behaviour on the roads but also look beyond that.

One clear priority is young drivers. People aged 15-24 continue to experience nearly twice the rate of death and serious injury of any other age group. Improving skills, judgement and behaviour at the start of a person's driving career offers a strong opportunity to reduce harm among the group at greatest risk while also establishing safer habits that can last a lifetime. Whether the upcoming changes to New Zealand's graduated driver licensing system do enough to achieve this will be a crucial area to monitor in the years ahead.

A second priority is reducing the large regional differences that exist across New Zealand. The safest regions experience less than half the rate of road trauma seen in some provincial areas. Improving safety in more rural areas will be key for the country's ongoing progress overall.

The third area is distraction. It emerged repeatedly throughout this review. Drivers identified it as a factor in many near misses and minor collisions, as well as the most common area where they felt they could improve their own driving. At the same time, one in five people admitted checking messages while driving. Distraction may become one of the defining road safety challenges of the next decade.



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