

Car crashes overlooked killer of unborn babies

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Motor vehicle crashes involving mothers-to-be account for more than half of all New Zealand's foetal deaths due to maternal injury, new University of Otago research reveals.

In the first-ever study to describe foetal mortality due to vehicle crashes in this country, an Otago [injury prevention](#) researcher shows that of the 41 foetal and [newborn deaths](#) due to maternal injury between 1997 and 2008, 21 involved [motor vehicle collisions](#), according to narrative data on the foetal death certificate.

Professor Hank Weiss, Director of the University's Injury Prevention Research Unit, says he found that the rate of foetal death resulting from such crashes is about twice that of infant crash-related deaths in New Zealand.

The research also showed that while Māori make up 15% of the population, they account for 27% of the foetal deaths due to maternal crash injury.

"This outcome may be partly driven by Māori women having higher [birth rates](#) at younger ages when they are at greater risk of being in a crash," Professor Weiss says.

Professor Weiss says that foetal death and injury due to maternal injury is a largely invisible but important component of child [injury mortality](#) in New Zealand.

"The problem remains hidden, and under-reported, because of the way foetal trauma is coded in vital statistics and the lack of pregnancy status recorded in crash and injury surveillance systems," he says.

The research is published in the latest issue of the journal *Australian Epidemiologist*.

In the article, Professor Weiss concludes that New Zealand needs to pay more attention to reporting and preventing maternal injuries and adverse foetal outcomes.

Ministry of Transport data show that from the early 1990s to the mid 2000s the average annual distance driven per woman for ages 15-39 increased by about 40% to 7,000 km, he says, contributing to increased exposure to the risk.

To address the problem, Professor Weiss recommends a combination of increased protection for vehicle occupants, less driving and less risky driving to suit different lifestyles.

Provided by University of Otago

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