

# Researchers: Our children are victims of road violence—we need to talk about the deadly norms of car use

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The deaths and injuries caused by car drivers are an everyday occurrence. This road violence has become normalized. We take it for

granted as the price we have to pay to use our cars.

Globally, [car crashes](#) are the world's [leading cause of death](#) for people aged five to 25. In Australia, road deaths included [293 people in this age group](#) in 2022, a rise from 281 in 2019 and 276 in 2018.

These deaths are stark reminders of the structural problem with a deeply entrenched, car-dominated culture. The huge numbers of deaths and injuries on our roads are a result of choosing to build our society around cars. This degree of harm does not seem to draw the same level of outrage as any other form of violence would.

As we argue in a [newly published paper](#), these tragedies will continue unless we recognize the consequences of our ongoing misguided choices. We must act with the urgency this situation deserves.

## **Lives lost and lives blighted**

These figures represent real people and real lives.

In March 2023, [a truck hit two 16-year-olds](#) who were crossing at pedestrian lights in front of their inner-city Adelaide school. Both were rushed to hospital with serious injuries.

Three months later, [a four-wheel-drive hit a 38-year-old woman and her six-year-old daughter](#) who were crossing the street next to their school in the Adelaide CBD. The woman was pinned under the car. The six-year-old was also dragged under the car and pulled out by another parent.

In September 2023, [a car hit an eight-year-old boy](#) who was playing soccer with his three-year-old brother in a suburban Melbourne laneway. He was trapped between two vehicles for about 20 minutes. He had life-threatening injuries.

## Not some isolated accidents

The [underlying causes](#) of car crashes and their link to planning and transport policies continue to be ignored.

These policies have promoted car-based infrastructure and urban sprawl. Public transport and [active transport](#) such as walking and cycling have been neglected.

Children are the victims of our obsession with allowing heavy, fast-moving vehicles in our everyday spaces, including around schools.

The freedom of [car drivers](#) comes at the expense of the freedom of all others. At the same time, the environment and society bear most of the costs of this car culture.

## A form of victim-blaming

In the Adelaide inner-city [crash](#) in March, responses included pruning a tree, so it didn't obscure a [traffic light](#), and [auditing pedestrian crossings](#). Red-and-white-striped wrapping was added to the traffic light poles, along with signs telling pedestrians to "stop, look and listen" before stepping on a street.

These inconsequential modifications mostly target the potential victims, which highlights our [state of denial](#) of the role of cars. It reinforces the privileged position of cars and their drivers –children are the ones who need to be disciplined and reminded to be more alert and careful around cars.

It's essentially a form of [victim blaming](#). Instead of reducing the source of violence, we tell everybody to be more careful around it.

## Normalization of crashes must stop

Neglecting the root causes of these crashes stops us taking more effective action.

We could, for instance, reduce the space allocated to cars by creating car-free or no-parking zones. We could reduce the speed limits for cars to be closer to the average speeds of walking (6 kilometers per hour—the accepted speed in most holiday parks) or cycling (15-20km/h). And we could create disincentives such as higher [registration](#) and [parking fees](#) to discourage the use of increasingly large vehicles, which multiply the collision risks for those outside them.

Car crashes are also normalized through the [way in which they are brought to public attention](#). We stop hearing about these crashes a few days after they occur, and we rarely hear about their [long-term and far-reaching effects](#).

In the crash involving a woman and her six-year-old, the girl was reported to be lucky to avoid severe injuries. Similarly, it was reported the younger brother of the boy trapped between two cars escaped serious injury.

These reports do not capture the trauma of a six-year-old who heard her mother's screams while both were forced under a moving two-ton metal object. They overlook the impact on a three-year-old who sees his brother's body being crushed between two cars.

These reports also rarely capture the trauma other family members and friends endure, probably for the rest of their lives. And don't forget the severe impacts on the lives of the driver, first responders and bystanders.

The rippling impacts of these crashes remain largely hidden from the

public. As does their systemic nature.

## **To end this violence we must rethink our priorities**

We should refuse to accept that vehicles hitting children are "[accidents](#)" or unavoidable outcomes of our essential lifestyles.

We can choose to reclaim the status we give to cars in our everyday spaces. The price we pay, both social and environmental, is too high to sustain. We have plenty of better and safer travel choices, such as active and [public transport](#).

We need to recognize that the car threatens children's safety and their right to [independently roam public spaces](#). This directly threatens their [long-term health and well-being](#).

Car drivers' rights are not more important than children's rights to be safe on our streets. The interests of those who oppose measures such as reduced car parking or lower [speed limits](#) should not be more important than our children's well-being. No benefit of a pro-car policy can be greater than the benefit of children's active presence in public spaces, where they have a right to be imperfect and distracted.

As a society, a public conversation about reassessing our priorities is well overdue. Only then can we challenge the unquestioned status of the car and our tendency to take the violence that it generates for granted.

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