

# Evaluating a training program to improve the safety of incident responders on high-speed roads

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A safety program to lessen risks faced by emergency service personnel and others responding to incidents on high-speed roads has been trialed

in Victoria, resulting in a recommendation for similar programs to be rolled out Australia-wide.

Professor Sharon Newnam, Head of the QUT School of Psychology and Counseling in the Faculty of Health, created the "Safety in the Grey Zone" program while at Monash University in response to SafeWork Australia data revealing the [fatality rate](#) (2.1 per 100,000 workers) for emergency services was higher than the national rate of 1.5; and the serious injury claim rate was four times higher.

The prevalence of post-traumatic stress disorder in first responder populations meanwhile is estimated to be six to seven times that of the wider community.

Professor Newnam has now [published](#) a review of a trial of the program in the *Journal of Safety Research*, conducted with participants from six Victorian incident response agencies. The review is titled "Safety in the Grey Zone": Evaluation of a training program to improve the [safety](#) of incident responders on high-speed roads."

"High-speed roads are complex and dynamic environments long-recognized as posing a significant safety risk for workers, largely due to factors such as fast-moving vehicles, traffic volume, attitudes of motorists (unsafe driving behaviors), roadworks, existing crashes, and back of queue incidents," Professor Newnam said.

"'Safety in the Grey Zone' was created to optimize the skills of incident responders in communicating and coordinating safety practices at the scene of an incident on a high-speed road.

"The concept of the grey zone originated during a stakeholder focus group discussion where it was mentioned that 'things are never black and white during an incident on a high-speed road.'"

The program differentiates between competencies like skills required to manage safety in high-risk traffic environments, which are role-specific and process-driven tasks, and capability, including skills in collaboration, engagement and teamwork requiring personal, interpersonal and cognitive ability.

Representatives from a Victorian government transport agency, the [police service](#), [ambulance service](#), rural fire brigade, a private transport agency, and a state emergency service took part in online sessions using real-life scenarios, including a multi-car fatality and a break down, to help them understand the impact of their actions on their own and others' safety practices. Most participants had at least 10 years' experience in their roles.

"The majority reported they encountered an average of three secondary incidents each month at the scenes of the incidents they respond to, so they have acquired substantial exposure and experience in managing safety on high-speed roads," Professor Newnam said.

"The roles and responsibilities of workers within each agency are important to consider in understanding the management of safety. In Victoria, each emergency service, such as ambulance services and fire brigades, is allocated distinct responsibilities but there are instances where certain responsibilities are shared depending on the availability of resources."

Implementation of the program was conducted in collaboration with the Holmesglen TAFE, Eastlink and Visual Learning Design.

"Participants reported positively on their experience and satisfaction with the 'Safety in the Grey Zone' program, especially in relation to it helping them think outside the square on how other agencies view a scene," Professor Newnam said.

"Feedback included how the training highlighted the need for inter-agency collaboration, the value of debriefing and having the confidence to approach other agencies to get an understanding of scene safety issues.

"We also found that the greater the number of attendees at a [training session](#), along with representation of a variety of agencies, the greater the engagement of participants.

"Our findings provide recommendations to consider in the program's future roll-out in Victoria and Australia-wide, as well as suggestions for future evaluations to assess the program's effectiveness in improving the safety of incident responders operating on high-speed roads.

"Also, while most participants had many years of experience, this is not always an advantage because they are not hearing about the challenges faced by people newer to the job. Further implementation of the [program](#) should take that into account."

**More information:** Sharon Newnam et al, 'Safety in the Grey Zone': Evaluation of a training program to improve the safety of incident responders on high-speed roads, *Journal of Safety Research* (2024). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jsr.2024.01.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jsr.2024.01.011)

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