

Driver behavior not altered by roadside memorials, study finds

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Roadside memorials may be controversial, but a University of Otago study has found they have very little impact on driver behavior or perception of road safety.

Lead author Dr. Vanessa Beanland, of the Department of Psychology, says the topic of roadside memorials is important because of the high number of deaths occurring on our roads—the World Health Organisation estimates the global figure to be 1.35 million each year.

"We often think of road deaths solely in terms of the person who dies, but those deaths have tremendous impact on the people left behind—loved ones, and anyone else involved in the collision and aftermath.

"Some of these people find comfort in establishing memorials, whereas others find it upsetting to have regular reminders of what happened. Likewise, governments around the world vary in their policies—some prohibit roadside memorials, whereas others have used them to create road safety campaigns," she says.

While views on roadside memorials are mixed, there is almost no [scientific research](#) examining whether roadside memorials are distracting or whether they influence safety-related behaviors.

In order to address the gap, Dr. Beanland and Rachael Wynne, of the University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia, recruited 40 drivers to determine if roadside memorials divert drivers' attention away from the road, and whether they affect their judgments of how safe a road is and what speed they should drive at.

The drivers watched videos of road scenes, with and without memorials, and had their eye movements to the side of the road, and speed reduction and perceived risk ratings monitored.

The results, published in the journal *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, showed memorials captured visual attention but the fixations were relatively brief (about 400 milliseconds). Dr. Beanland

says such short glances away from the road are common and not considered unsafe.

Despite a common belief that roadside memorials provide a useful safety message to take care at that specific point, the study also found they actually had no impact on participants' perceived safety of a [road](#) or on their chosen speed.

"Our results show that roadside memorials frequently capture attention, but this doesn't necessarily result in an observable change in behavior. This makes sense because there are so many other factors that influence our driving behavior," she says.

The majority of study participants supported permanent [roadside](#) memorials, though some argued for their size and location to be regulated. A small number strongly opposed memorials on the belief they were distracting or emotionally distressing.

More information: Vanessa Beanland et al. Effects of roadside memorials on drivers' risk perception and eye movements, *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications* (2019). [DOI: 10.1186/s41235-019-0184-1](#)

Provided by University of Otago

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