



NATIONAL MEDIA RELEASE

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Absent-minded drivers take their toll

Despite the millions of dollars spent warning motorists against speeding, fatigue and drink-driving, almost half of all crashes on Australian roads could be averted by drivers simply paying more attention, the 2008 *AAMI Crash Index* showsⁱ.

“Absent-mindedness is a factor in 44 per cent of all car collisions, with drivers much more likely to crash due to their own inattention than from speeding, fatigue and alcohol combined,” AAMI Public Affairs Manager Geoff Hughes said.

“While speed, fatigue and alcohol are factors in 37 per cent of car crashes, AAMI’s research shows inattention is the number one reason drivers crash into another vehicle or stationary object.”

Mr Hughes applauded state and federal campaigns to reduce the national road tollⁱⁱ, but said individual drivers ultimately had the power to avert most crashes by changing their behaviour and paying more attention.

“While governments and the police can discourage speeding and drink-driving through education and enforcement, it’s impossible to legislate against absent-mindedness,” Mr Hughes said.

“Drivers need to make better decisions about their fitness to drive, whether it be refraining from driving when emotionally charged or consciously taking a break when fatigue sets in.”

Consulting psychologist John Cheetham agreed, saying the high number of drivers attributing their crashes to inattention was symptomatic of a driving culture that is mindful of everything but driving.

“The lifestyles of working professionals, stay-at-home parents, and even secondary and tertiary students, is such that when they get in their car they have a tendency to go into auto-pilot, leaving them free to focus on everything else that is happening in their lives when they should be thinking about their driving,” Mr Cheetham said.

“To improve their concentration and prevent avoidable crashes, drivers must use good judgement and not drive when their minds are highly-focussed on work or social issues. Getting safely from A to B must be the priority for drivers, from the time they turn on the ignition to the time they turn it off,” Mr Cheetham said.

Speed, fatigue and alcohol still factors

The 2008 *AAMI Crash Index* shows speed, fatigue and alcohol were still major factors in car crashes nationally.

“One in six Australian drivers (17 per cent) attributed previous crashes to speed, followed by fatigue (11 per cent) and alcohol (nine per cent),” Mr Hughes said. “While a slight improvement on last year when 20 per cent of crashes were blamed on speed and 13 per cent on fatigue, the same cannot be said of drink-driving; drivers attributing crashes to drinking is unchanged.”

More worrying is the number of drivers who persist in behaviour that is not only illegal, but dangerous as well.

ⁱ The 2008 AAMI Crash Index is based on an independent telephone and internet survey of 2503 licensed drivers in all states and territories conducted by Sweeney Research.

ⁱⁱ Australian Transportation Safety Bureau figures show an average annual drop in road fatalities of 1.7 per cent between 2001-06

“While one in 10 drivers nationally (eight per cent) said they exceeded the speed limit ‘most of the time’, an astonishing one-third (34 per cent) admit driving when they knew they were over .05, and 15 per cent have taken a different route home after drinking to avoid being breathalysed.

“This sort of willingness to get behind the wheel, when all the signs say you shouldn’t, suggests some drivers are either ignorant of the law, or just plain stupid,” Mr Hughes said.

“It is little wonder then that of those drivers who have had their licence cancelled or suspended, almost half attribute it to speeding (44 per cent), and 40 per cent to drink driving.”

Inattention can be costly

“Paying attention while driving is as important on open roads and highways as it is when reversing and parking, especially considering one in six insurance claims in 2007 (18 per cent) resulted from drivers hitting stationary objects or parked cars,” Mr Hughes said.

On average, repairing damage to cars that collided with a stationary object, such as a pole, tree or fence, costs \$1821. Front-to-rear collisions accounted for almost three in 10 crash-related insurance claims and cost, on average, \$2704.

“This highlights the contribution of driver inattention to crashes, considering many front-to-rear collisions happen at low speeds, and could have been avoided had the driver been paying attention,” he said.

Crashes more common than not...

The 2008 *AAMI Crash Index* shows Australia is still a nation of car crashers, with eight in 10 drivers nationally (81 per cent) saying they have been involved in a car crash. This is supported by 2007 AAMI claims data showing insurance claims for crash damage is at a seven-year high. The national Claims Incidence Rate, which is the number of AAMI policyholders per 100 who had accidents in a one-year period, reached 15.2 in 2007, the highest since 2001.

“Most crash-related insurance claims are for repairing damage that was caused by drivers not paying attention. Front-to-rear collisions are by far the most common cause, accounting for three in 10 motor insurance claims (27 per cent), followed by a failure to give way (20 per cent).

“Even the simple act of reversing is problematic for some drivers, with 12 per cent of claims for reverse collision damage. Repairs to crash damage such as this could be avoided if drivers simply focussed on their driving,” Mr Hughes said.

...and cost more than just claims

The almost \$500 million in crash-related insurance claims AAMI paid out in 2007 pales in significance against the overall cost of crashes and collisions to the community. The Australian Transportation Safety Bureau (ATSB) estimated the economic costs of road crashes in 2005 to be at least \$18 billion. With more cars on the road now than ever, this figure has likely risen.

Costs to injured crash victims can be higher than for crashes where victims have died. A study by the Australian Institute of Health and Wellbeing showed more than 50,000 people were seriously injured in land transport accidents in 2005-2006. More than half of those resulted in hospital admissions for people aged less than 30 (52 per cent), and more than one-quarter for people aged 15-24. Car collisions with another vehicle or a stationary object, motorcycle or cyclist, were responsible for 0.5 per cent of all hospital stays and 7.1 per cent of all injury-related hospital stays.

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The full 2008 *AAMI Crash Index* is available at www.aami.com.au

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