REPORTING ROAD TRAFFIC INCIDENTS:
A resource for the media and road safety sector.

Supporting our community to receive information that does not trigger harm.
In 2021 there were 29,806 road traffic crashes\(^1\) and 1,753 people killed or seriously injured on WA roads.\(^2\) Every year road trauma costs WA $2.4 billion,\(^3\) however the true impact that road trauma has on our lives extends beyond this figure.

This resource has been developed to support the media to report road traffic incidents in a manner that has a positive effect on road safety and supports those affected by road trauma.

The reporting of road traffic incidents in the media has a significant influence on the audience’s perception of the incident and society’s attitude towards road safety. Also, by nature, the media evokes emotive and personal responses in its audience, which may cause some audiences to relive their road trauma experience.

Using evidence-based reporting, media plays a key role in:

- Generating awareness of how frequent and serious road traffic incidents are,
- Increasing knowledge of key road safety behaviours, and
- Growing awareness of where to seek support if needed.

Road traffic incidents are a frequent occurrence in Western Australia and place a significant burden on the whole WA community.

Photo by Harry Cunningham
Road trauma happens unexpectedly and can impact the way in which we view the world. It is normal for the driver, passenger, witness, person who assisted at the scene of a road crash, family members or friends to experience a range of upsetting thoughts, feelings and reactions following a road traffic incident. Most people will feel better within a few days or weeks, but for some it may take longer to recover.

It has been estimated that globally more than 15% of road traffic crash survivors suffer from an acute stress disorder and that post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was prevalent in 21-29% of Australian road traffic crash survivors. There are a number of factors that influence the likelihood of an individual experiencing a psychological issue after a road crash, including: a previous or existing mental health condition, personal fault in the incident, perceived threat to life during the crash, physical injury severity, if the incident involved a compensation claim, expectations regarding returning to work, and support received.

The prevalence and impact of psychological symptoms can vary over time, however research findings have indicated that psychological symptoms are still common three years after a motor vehicle crash. The compounding impact of this trauma can influence the individuals’ quality of life, relationships, social engagements, financial independence and health outcomes. Despite these potential long term implications, mental health consequences are often overlooked in comparison to physical health rehabilitation.

Due to the frequent occurrence of road traffic incidents in WA there is the potential for crashes to be normalised and for individuals involved in road traffic incidents to be retraumatised by another incident, reinforcing the need for consideration in road crash reporting.

### The role of the media

The media has significant power to educate the public about social issues and drive change, which can have positive and negative consequences on road safety in WA. When the reporting of road traffic incidents is evidence-based and communicated sensitively, the media can use its leverage to help the audience understand the problem in focus, evoke positive behaviour change, remove barriers to help-seeking and change societal beliefs by reframing road traffic incidents as a preventable public health issue.

The media’s primary function is to inform and entertain people, but they also play an important role in health promotion by supporting road safety initiatives and treatment efforts for people affected by road trauma.

Poor reporting practices involving traumatic events can sensationalise the incident, misdirect the audience’s point of concern, obscure the solutions, frighten victims and increase distress among the bereaved. In the case of suicide, there is growing evidence that irresponsible reporting can increase the rate of suicide following the media report.

Due to these potential harms, it is vital that the media reports and portrays road traffic incidents accurately to continue reducing the impact of road trauma on the WA community.

Research into the reporting of road traffic incidents in the United States found that changing the editorial patterns of the reports can significantly affect the readers’ perception of what happened, what should be done about it and how they attribute their blame for the incident.
Eight things to consider when reporting on a road traffic incident:

- Help-seeking information
- Describing the road traffic incident
- Language
- Use of imagery
- Interviews and consent
- Comments from experts
- Story prominence
- Looking after yourself

Key tips when reporting road trauma incidents
Help-seeking information

Stories about road trauma can adversely affect people, particularly those previously affected by another trauma.

Despite the evidence of the impact of road trauma and the effectiveness of prevention efforts, the majority of people affected by a road traffic incident do not seek help soon after a crash. This can be attributed to individuals not understanding the impact of the incident and therefore not seeking help until several years after the incident when their mental health condition has become chronic.

After a road traffic incident, people often find the most important things are time, understanding and support from family and friends. However, if an individual is experiencing ongoing or distressing symptoms which are interfering with their usual life, professional support should be sought.

The World Health Organization (WHO) identifies mental health care and psychological support as key components of the post-crash response due to its role in mitigating grief, anxiety and other bereavement reactions, and in preventing psychological distress becoming a disability that interferes with re-integration into work and social life. If symptoms are ongoing or worsen 4-6 weeks after the road traffic incident, Injury Matters recommends that professional support is sought out.

Professional support can be offered by a variety of health professionals, including doctors, psychologists and counsellors experienced in grief, loss and trauma.

To normalise help-seeking behaviour and reduce barriers individuals may face to accessing professional support, it is essential that information about support services are included when reporting on any road traffic incident.

At least two crisis support options should be listed and they should be selected based on the type of media output that the report is being included in and who the story is being communicated to.

Injury Matters provides free specialist support for individuals impacted by road trauma, through the Road Trauma Support WA service weekdays from 8:30am to 4:30pm. It is recommended that at a minimum the following statement is included within all reports regarding a road traffic incident:

"If you or anyone you know has been affected by a road crash contact Road Trauma Support WA on 1300 004 814"
As with reporting any other event, it is vital that all reports of road traffic incidents are presented in context, only include information known to be accurate and provide a balanced portrayal of the incident.

Due to the long-lasting impact of road trauma on the affected community, it is important that what is being reported on is not trivialised. Evidence and local data is helpful to give the audience context around the extent of the problem in WA and in reinforcing that the incident was not an isolated event.

To access WA’s latest road traffic fatality data visit the Road Safety Commission website or for traffic and crash data, visit the Main Roads website. Although road traffic incidents commonly occur on Western Australian roads, they can be predictable and preventable.

Drivers play a key role in raising community awareness of the multiple factors, including behaviour, that contributed to the road traffic incident and the severity of the incident.

Approximately 75% of all serious crashes involve a mistake, a momentary lapse in attention or fatigue. Person-based language is needed when describing the road traffic incident, however it is vital that all elements that contributed to the incident are outlined.

To access WA’s latest road traffic fatality data visit the Road Safety Commission website or for traffic and crash data, visit the Main Roads website. Alternatively, there are some components of a story that are not beneficial to include, such as:

- **Details that may identify individuals involved in the incident.** I.e. the inclusion of the person’s occupation and the location of the incident may be enough information for a loved one to identify the individual involved.

- **Counterfactual statements** that imply that the incident could have been avoided if those involved behaved differently. Despite human involvement in the majority of road traffic incidents, these kinds of statements are not helpful for legal reasons and in consideration of the family.

- **Statements that undermine the trauma caused** to those involved in the incident and the broader community. I.e. insensitively reporting traffic delays.
Words have power. It is important to consider the language used and how it may be interpreted by the audience. The table below outlines terms that should not be used with road traffic incident reports due to the inferences that the audience may make when used.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Incorrect</th>
<th>Consequences</th>
<th>Suggested</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accident</td>
<td>Implies the incident happened spontaneously, without reason or human intervention.</td>
<td>Incident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Crash</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Road trauma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road Toll</td>
<td>Crashes impact real people, and people are not numbers.</td>
<td>Road deaths</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road Statistics</td>
<td></td>
<td>Road fatalities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offender</td>
<td>Legally, “offender” only applies once a conviction is made.</td>
<td>Culpable party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Person/driver in question</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Be respectful of everyone involved, including those first on the scene, and their family by upholding the dignity of all individuals involved in the incident.
- Avoid sensationalising the crash event by using language which glamorises any behaviours which led to the incident occurring. e.g. reckless driving or mobile phone use.
- Avoid using language that negatively generalises the persons behaviour to a whole subgroup of people.

For example, if it is reported that the motorcyclist was the cause of the incident, other road users may negatively change their interactions with motorcyclists on the road.

It is important to consider the language used and how it may be interpreted by the audience.
Photos and video footage should not be published or broadcast before all families involved in the road traffic incident have been notified.

This applies to imagery of individuals affected by the incident, vehicles involved in the crash scene, personal belongings and any other identifying features of the vehicle. Where images may appear generic or dated, they are readily identifiable by the loved ones of those involved in the incident.

While family members may have provided consent, the impact of imagery to loved ones when seen in the media has the potential to retraumatise individuals involved in other road traffic incidents and must be considered.

To support a Safe System approach to road safety, where ‘generic’ imagery is used it is recommended that it reflects a safe road, such as sealed road shoulders with audible lines and a low travel speed.

Use of imagery

Carefully consider the impact on families when using images or footage from an incident where someone was killed or seriously injured.

Provide a warning in the introduction of the story that the content may distress some viewers.

Follow cultural protocols regarding using the name or image of a deceased Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander person.

While images may appear generic or dated, they may be readily identifiable by those involved or their loved ones.

Do not use any footage or images from a different incident.

Do not use any dashcam footage.
Where possible, informed consent should be obtained from an appropriate contact of the individual/s involved in the road traffic incident before identifying those involved.

As mentioned on page 2, trauma is common following a road traffic incident. The media has a role to minimise the long-term impacts of road trauma by avoiding intrusion and where serious injury or death has occurred, allowing privacy to all grieving parties.

Road trauma experts recommend not approaching family members or friends for an interview or comment as it could cause further harm.

Following an incident, grieving family and friends may have reduced capacity to consent to or understand the impact the interview may have on their mental health.

When determined appropriate to progress with interviewing individuals who have lived experience, take care and consider the timing of the incident.

Even if an individual has provided consent, prior to commencing the interview ensure they are still willing to proceed. Recovery is not linear and the individual may no longer feel able to proceed with the interview.

Whether conducting the interview yourself or including information collated by someone else, ensure sensitivity and good judgement when reporting on people’s experiences.

Following an incident, grieving family and friends may have reduced capacity to consent or understand the impact the interview may have on their mental health.
Reporting road traffic incidents can be distressing, especially if you have a personal experience, are present at a traumatic scene or have been exposed to multiple incidents over time.

Additionally, media personnel are often early on scene of a road traffic incident and may even constitute first responders in some instances.

It is important to safeguard your wellbeing and that of your colleagues.

Alert your manager if you feel covering a story may negatively affect your wellbeing.

Keep an eye on your colleagues after they have been exposed to road trauma.

Road Trauma Support WA is available to you, whether through our fact sheets and resources, for general information or guidance, to help support yourself and others.
There is no ‘timeline’ for when people can experience psychological conditions after a road traffic incident.

People impacted by road trauma report improvements in their mental health three months after the incident, while others can experience late onset psychiatric outcomes. Therefore, it is vital that individuals experiencing road trauma are supported no matter what time period has passed since the road traffic incident occurred.

The Injury Matters eDirectory hosts a number of organisations who are available to assist with expert advice, resources and information regarding post-crash care. Injury Matters are fortunate to provide support to people who are impacted by road trauma in WA and encourage you to reduce the impact of road trauma and support those people affected by a road traffic incident by utilising this guide to responsibly report road traffic incidents in WA.

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There is no ‘timeline’ for when people can experience psychological conditions after a road traffic incident.
References


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- Everymind
- Amber Community
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- Western Australian Local Government Association

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Injury Matters acknowledge the Whadjuk Noongar people as the traditional custodians of the land on which we live and work and recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples continuing connection to land, waters and community across Western Australia.

Photography by Nathan Hurst