

DRIVING IN UNFAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS

Part 3: Country Driving/City Driving

Parts 1 and 2 of this series considered the issues surrounding international drivers in Australia, and Australian drivers travelling interstate. Both groups are at an increased risk of a fatal crash when driving in unfamiliar surroundings. Both are more prone to fatigue and rolling their vehicles than local drivers, and both are likely to be involved in crashes that result in their own death or the death of one of their passengers.

This monograph considers the risks entailed by city drivers travelling in the country and country drivers in the city. For the purposes of this article, "city" is defined as a centre of more than 100,000 people. Crash details were extracted from the Federal Office of Road Safety Fatality File for fatal passenger vehicle crashes in 1992, which summarises the outcomes of coroners' investigations into fatal crashes that year.

Just as we often believe that interstate drivers are not as good as local drivers, country people sometimes attribute the bulk of country crashes to city drivers. City drivers, conversely, may have a poor opinion of country drivers. But how good are city and country drivers?

The majority of fatal crashes (950 of 1617) happen outside of cities and the majority of those involve country drivers (627). Similarly, the majority of fatal city crashes involve city drivers (601 of 667). It is, of course, hardly surprising that country drivers tend to be more involved in country crashes and city drivers tend to figure prominently in city crashes.

Rate of involvement of drivers per 100,000 population of those 17 years and over

	CITY		COUNTRY	
	Male driver	Female driver	Male driver	Female driver
NSW	16.1	5.8	23.4	8.8
VIC	14.9	5.5	22.4	10.5
QLD	16.7	6.8	22.1	10.2
SA	17.5	6.9	29.1	5.8
WA	16.9	7.9	20.7	8.3
TAS	23.1	17.1	25.5	8.5
NT	—	—	31.1	8.5
ACT	18.1	5.8	—	—
Australia	16.2	6.3	23.4	9.2

It is perhaps more interesting to consider crash involvement relative to the size of the population in the country and the city. The above table gives the rate of involvement in fatal crashes of city and country drivers per 100,000 people of driving age (17 years and over).

This table demonstrates that male drivers tend to be more involved in fatal crashes than female drivers, and country drivers more than city drivers. Male country drivers are involved in 23.4 fatal crashes per 100,000 population of driver age compared to a male city driver rate of 16.2 crashes. Similarly, female country drivers are involved in 9.2 fatal crashes per 100,000 of driver age population compared with 6.3 crashes for female city drivers. The rate of involvement for country drivers is approximately 45 per cent higher than that for city drivers.

In recent years, the Traffic Accident Commission of Victoria has run a campaign called Country People Die on Country Roads. This is true not only in Victoria but for all of Australia. In each state and territory, rates for country drivers are consistently higher than those for city drivers.

Country driving

As a nation we pride ourselves on our rural heritage, and country driving is undertaken by most Australians at some time. Nearly one third of fatal crashes in the country involve city drivers.

The following table details various risk factors for city and country drivers. Risk factors are given as a percentage of total involvement of city drivers in fatal country crashes. These are compared with risk factors for country drivers in the country and city drivers in the city.

The reasons that city drivers are involved in fatal country crashes are generally very similar to the reasons they are involved in fatal city crashes. Alcohol, speed and driver error are equally well represented in both groups of crashes. Alcohol and

Driver involvement in fatal crashes			
	City crash	Country crash	Total
City driver	601	323	924
Country driver	66	627	693
Total	667	950	1617

Percentage involvement of major risk factors for city and country drivers

	<i>City drivers</i>		<i>Country drivers</i>	
	In the city	In the country	In the city	In the country
Single vehicle crashes	19%	31%	20%	35%
Alcohol	15%	14%	20%	28%
Speed	24%	24%	23%	29%
Overtake	8%	20%	14%	24%
Fatigue	4%	16%	8%	8%
Not wearing seat belt	6%	4%	2%	14%
Driver error	21%	18%	24%	16%

speed are most prominent in fatal country crashes involving country drivers. Country drivers are less likely to wear seat belts.

As might be expected, city drivers are more likely to be involved in fatal single-vehicle crashes and overturns on country roads than in the city. However, country drivers have even higher rates of overturn and single-vehicle crashes than their city counterparts.

The only danger which increases for city drivers in the country is fatigue. Fatigue is a major problem for those travelling long distances. It is a factor in 13 per cent of fatal crashes involving international drivers, 19 per cent of cases involving interstate drivers, and in 16 per cent of city drivers involved in fatal country crashes - which is double the rate of fatigue experienced by country drivers.

City driving

The involvement of country drivers in fatal city crashes (10%) is much lower than the involvement of city drivers in fatal country crashes (33%).

Country drivers appear to adapt as well to city driving as their city counterparts. Overall, especially considering the relatively small number of country driver involvements, the risk pattern for country drivers is very nearly the same as for city drivers and stands in contrast to country driver performance in the country.

Risks relating to alcohol, speed and seat belt use are all reduced when the country driver enters the city. It is outside the scope of this paper to attempt a detailed analysis of why this is so.

One might conjecture that it is related to the level of police enforcement of traffic regulations and to public education in road safety. Both of these tend to be high in cities and city drivers live in an environment where random breath testing or speed cameras are prevalent. Constant exposure to these enforcement measures may have altered the behaviour of city drivers so that they tend to behave in the same way when in the country.

Country drivers, on the other hand, normally drive in an environment of relatively low police enforcement and may take more risks. They will change their behaviour, however, when confronted by increased enforcement as is found in cities.

Conclusion

The earlier parts of this series found evidence that international drivers and interstate drivers experienced certain risk factors, such as fatigue, to a much greater extent than local drivers.

Such a conclusion is not evident in analysing fatal crashes involving city drivers and country drivers. The extent of involvement of country drivers in fatal city crashes is relatively low (about 10%)

and the major risks factors in those crashes are the same as those for fatal country crashes involving country drivers.

As with international and interstate drivers, city drivers are more prone to fatigue than local drivers in the country. Although this is, no doubt, due to the greater distances being covered, it remains an important source of risk that can be avoided. Monograph 4 outlines steps for avoiding fatigue on long trips, and further information is available from road safety authorities and motoring organisations.

However, with the exception of fatigue, city drivers involved in fatal country crashes display virtually the same risk factors as they do in fatal city crashes. More importantly, when considering some of the major risk factors, country drivers appear to be more at risk on country roads than city drivers.

In fatal country crashes, country drivers are more likely to have an illegal blood alcohol level and are less likely to be wearing a seat belt than city drivers. The fact that 14 per cent of country drivers involved in fatal crashes in the country were not wearing a seat-belt, compared with four per cent of city drivers, should be a matter of concern for country people.

A coordinated effort is being made among government, private sector and community organisations to develop a Rural Road Safety Action Plan. This plan is aimed at reducing the road toll on country roads identifying weaknesses in the rural road system, improving the behaviour of rural road users especially in relation to alcohol and speed, and increasing awareness of road safety issues in rural communities.

Country driving has certain risks relating to the distances involved and the conditions of rural roads. City drivers may well be travelling in unfamiliar surroundings when in the country and due caution is warranted but, somewhat surprisingly, country drivers are equally at risk.