

Why is there an elephant in the Wheatbelt?

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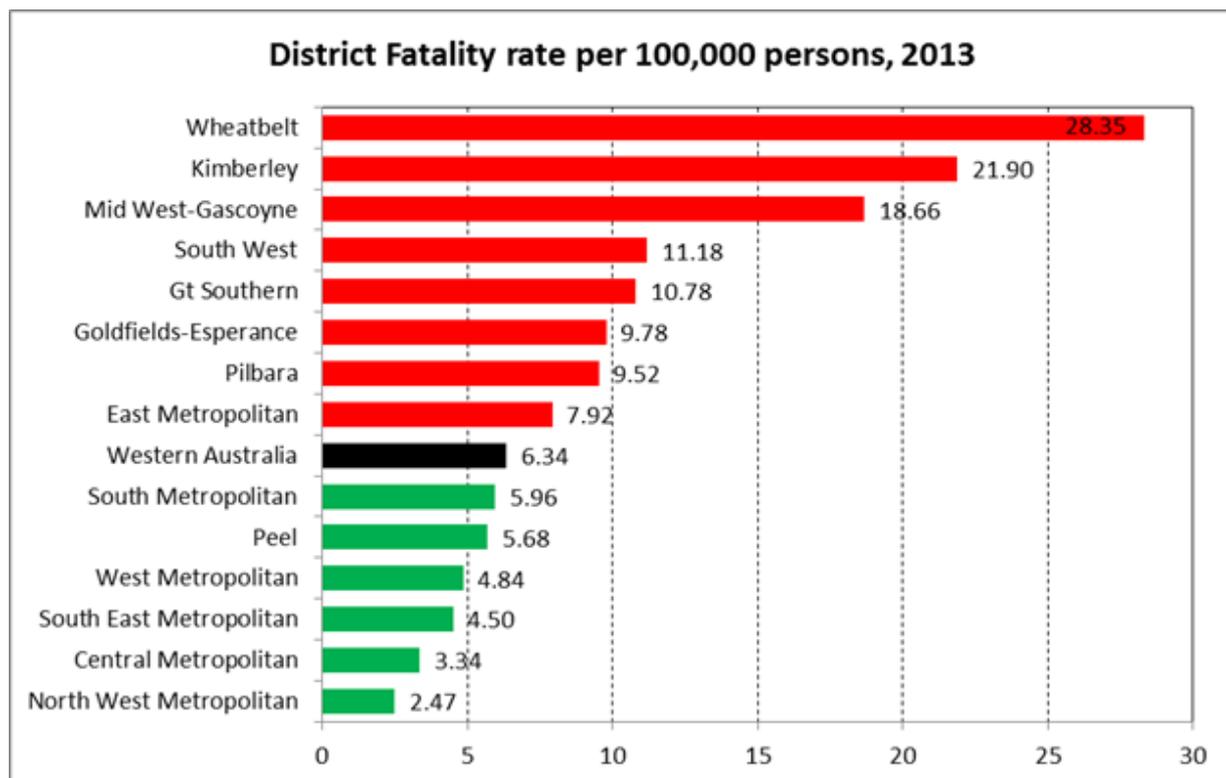
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Abstract

The Wheatbelt region in Western Australia has consistently had the highest fatality rate of WA regions. Following an analysis of the characteristics of Wheatbelt fatalities, the Royal Automobile Club of WA (RAC) undertook a novel community awareness and engagement strategy to highlight the issue as the first element. The second stage of the campaign -#ItsMyElephant – launched in April 2016, with the premise that every person in every community can help to improve road safety in the Wheatbelt.

Background

In 2012, the joint RAC - WA Police publication “*Fatal and Serious Injuries of WA Roads*” highlighted the over-representation of fatalities in the Wheatbelt. The Wheatbelt Police District’s fatality rate was six times the WA fatality rate and four times the fatality rate in both the nearby South West and Great Southern Police Districts.



The over-representation prompted an analysis of six years of crash data from 2007-2012, comparing what characteristics of fatal crashes are different between Wheatbelt, near neighbours and the whole state. The analysis demonstrated there is no single factor that dramatically differentiates Wheatbelt from its neighbours, although it displayed a number of characteristics which are higher than neighbouring district aggregations; eg Wheatbelt is characterised by high rates of single vehicle, driver only crashes with a relatively high proportion of alcohol and speed related crashes. Wheatbelt fatal crashes are typically on local roads involving local drivers.

Community Attitude Survey

There is limited information on whether community attitudes in the Wheatbelt are different from other regions, why that might be the case, and furthermore, if those attitudes contribute to the higher fatality rate. The hypothesis was if this was true; that features of Wheatbelt life, such as learning to drive on a farm without a seatbelt plus specific beliefs, misconceptions and attitudes all contribute.

In 2014, an online interviewing approach was used and surveyed 1350 respondents from Wheatbelt region, metropolitan region and other regional areas across Western Australia on their attitudes towards road safety, current road behaviours, knowledge regarding penalties and what ‘myths’ existed (eg the major problem is city-based drivers who don’t know how to drive on country roads).

The results showed that road users in the Wheatbelt were not vastly differentiated from other Regional or Metropolitan drivers in terms of their attitudes and reflected social expectations. The disconnect lie in the translation of desirable attitudes into desirable behaviours.

The Elephant in the Wheatbelt Campaign.

The campaign was conceptually developed around the elephant in the room and used a three metre high, four metre long elephant constructed from wrecked cars as the symbol to motivate community awareness and discussion on road safety. The campaign undertook a tour from April – October 2015 to break the silence about road trauma and bust the myths about road safety.



A second survey targeting the Wheatbelt region was conducted in September 2015 and included campaign evaluation questions. A total of 454 interviews were achieved. Overall the campaign had a high awareness and strongly addressed the initial objective of ‘getting people talking about road safety’ in the Wheatbelt. More than half (54%) spoke to friends/family about road safety, 73% reported to have thought about their behaviour and 40% reported to have changed their driving behaviour as a result of the campaign.

Driver attitudes remained relatively consistent to those seen in 2014. The effects of the campaign are yet to be filtered through into significantly changing driver behaviour, although in many cases, driver attitudes are more positive among those who have seen the campaign indicating a positive influence.

References

The data used in this analysis is sourced from the joint RAC-WA Police publication “Fatal and Serious Injuries on WA roads, 2012” and includes fatal and serious injuries due to road crashes between January 1, 2007, and December 31, 2012. The data is collected by the Attending Officer at the scene and remains subject to change.