ACRS Policy Position Statement
Climate Change and Road Safety

Summary

Current and future climate change will have increasing adverse health impacts and reduce road safety. Life and health are not exchangeable for other benefits in society (e.g., economic or efficiency). As one of the key contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, the transport system must adapt to address climate change and road trauma. Both are preventable and must be addressed by improving the design and management of the transport system. Active and sustainable mobility options such as public transport must be prioritised to decarbonise the transport system and benefit road safety.

Key policy positions

1. Governments should implement the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) recommendations because unmitigated climate change will result in road traffic injuries and other direct health and economic impacts.
2. Governments must immediately invest in active travel, public transport, and sustainable freight options, and disincentivise personal fossil fuel-based transport.
3. Default 30 km/h speed limits for all residential areas.
4. Governments should upgrade current infrastructure to prioritise active travel and public transport.

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Date adopted: May 2023

Policy problem

Climate change is a significant challenge to the planet, affecting the environment, people's livelihoods, quality of life, and infrastructure.(1, 2) Climate action and good health are equally important Sustainable Development Goals.(3) Climate change and road trauma have interconnected causes, impacts, and policy solutions. Climate change threatens human health via direct impacts and reduces road safety and engagement in healthy and safer transport choices such as cycling, walking, and public transport during more frequent extreme weather.

The underlying cause of climate change is excessive greenhouse gas emissions, of which the transport sector in Australia is responsible for 17%.(4) Transport emissions have grown more than any other sector, increasing nearly 60% since 1990.(4) Climate change produces more extreme weather events and adverse weather conditions, which can cause road crashes, divert spending into infrastructure maintenance rather than safety improvements, and discourage the use of more sustainable and safer mobility options such as public transport. Significantly, shifts to public transport and other forms of low emissions transport can enhance health, employment, energy security, and equity.(5)

Principles underpinning ACRS position

- Life and health are not exchangeable for other benefits in society (e.g., economic or efficiency); therefore, the transport system, one of the key contributors to greenhouse gas emissions, must adapt to address climate change and road trauma.
- It is never acceptable that people are killed or seriously injured in the road traffic system.
- Climate change's current and future consequences for health and quality of life are unacceptable and must be addressed through urgent action to mitigate the current and emerging climate change crisis.
- Road safety and climate change prevention must be aligned to maximise benefits for society.

Evidence base

Road safety can benefit from climate action

Public transport is the safest and most energy-efficient form of transportation.(6, 7) Australian research has confirmed that a mode shift from private vehicle to public transport (i.e., train, tram, or bus) for commuting would reduce not only total crashes but also severe crashes.(8) Better public transport access and coverage will also reduce the incidence of risky driving behaviours, such as inattentive and drug driving.(9) Shifting the balance of transport infrastructure, policy, and funding away from private fuel-based transport and towards public transport will prevent road trauma and increase the sustainability of the transport system. As public transport ridership increases, road safety outcomes will improve.

Public transport growth also supports climate action, using less fuel and energy than private car transport. Notably, the success of public transport relies on non-motorised transport (including walking and cycling) that acts as a feeder to public transport stops/terminals. However, the lack of access to safe walking, cycling, and public transport infrastructure is a critical barrier to modal shift strategies for green transport.(10)

The hierarchy of importance of road users in the transport system needs to prioritise active travel and public transport users over private vehicle occupants. This will also have important health and safety benefits as it will reduce emissions and increase physical activity. Public and private initiatives to reduce demand for

transport such as "working from home" arrangements and carpooling are also encouraged to address road safety and climate change.

Decarbonising road transport requires a large-scale shift from gasoline and diesel to biofuels, electricity, or hydrogen, either in dedicated battery-electric or fuel-cell vehicles or mixed configurations, such as plug-in hybrid-electric vehicles, as well as prioritising active travel and public transport.

Climate change has a direct impact on road trauma

Climate change increases the occurrence and severity of risky weather events, reducing road users' safety.

Climate change will increase the frequency of heavy rain and heatwave events.(11) An increase in rain is problematic for road safety because it reduces tyre-surface friction, impairs visibility for drivers, and makes vehicle handling more difficult. Greater rainfall frequency is expected to translate into higher collision counts,(12, 13) and heatwaves increase road fatalities.(14) Road pavements deteriorate faster with extreme weather resulting in potholes and other dangerous pavement damage. Advancements in vehicle safety technologies (such as advanced driver support systems) will not necessarily mitigate the increased risk because such technologies often do not work in risky weather situations such as rain.(15) These circumstances will also affect other road users such as pedestrians and cyclists as rain and heatwaves can result in falls, crashes, and health deterioration through heatstroke.

Extreme weather from climate change will also create road hazards and emergency evacuations where motorists may drive in unsafe conditions.

Disaster situations such as bushfires can create significant immediate and longer-term psychological stress for drivers, (16) increasing crash risk.(17, 18) The Country Fire Authority of Victoria dedicated a website to 'Staying safe in the car during a bushfire', noting that *"Car crashes are common in bushfires due to poor visibility"*.(19) Driving through floodwater is highly risky and can result in property damage, injuries, or fatalities.(20)

Climate change has the potential to deteriorate transport infrastructure in the Australasian region.

Sea-level rise will compromise coastal infrastructure of all types,(21, 22) and the increased frequency of excessive summer heat may compromise bridge integrity.(23) Heavy rainfall and subsequent floods can cause long term damage to transport infrastructure.(24) Deteriorated infrastructure contributes to road crashes, and the increased need for maintenance diverts resources from upgrading the safety of the road network or mitigating climate change.(22, 25)

Road safety improvements are needed to safely encourage more climate-friendly travel.

Given the ongoing threats associated with climate change, individuals and communities can privately or through policy-based incentives reduce fossil fuel-based transport usage, such as increasing walking, cycling, or using personal mobility devices to travel. These changes to mobility patterns will affect risk exposure and safety outcomes as active travellers are vulnerable road users.(26) Given the link between motorised transport, climate change, and road trauma, lowering speed limits will help mitigate climate change and increase road safety.(27) Introducing 30 km/h speed limits for residential areas and better infrastructure for active transport should be priorities for governments at all levels.

Road safety practice must evolve to consider climate change

Potential conflicts between road safety and climate change mitigation need to be managed. For example, trees on roadsides can be deadly in a crash,(27) however, planting and keeping trees is a meaningful way to mitigate climate change, provide shade, and reduce surface temperatures for pedestrians and cyclists.

Transport infrastructure construction to improve road safety requires significant amounts of natural raw materials. The extraction, transportation, and production of these materials produces waste, consumes energy, and emits greenhouse emissions. Significant benefits can be realised by finding new uses and solutions to reuse, repurpose, and repair civil infrastructure. Recycled, alternative, and sustainable materials can be successfully used in road infrastructure.(28) Road and transport infrastructure must address whole-of-life impacts of asset decisions and their future climatic risks through mitigative and adaptive responses.

Recommended policy actions

1. Governments should implement the recommendations of the IPCC.
2. Governments immediately invest in public transport, active travel, and sustainable freight options, and disincentivise personal fossil fuel-based transport.
3. Implementation of 30 km/h speed limits for residential areas and access roads to public transport.
4. Governments should limit urban sprawl.
5. Governments should upgrade current infrastructure to prioritise public transport/active travel.
6. New road infrastructure projects must explicitly consider and reduce environmental impacts and increase safety.
7. Governments invest in developing infrastructure resilience against extreme weather events
8. Governments limit the number of vehicles on the road.
9. The use of sustainable and recycled materials should be prioritised for all road and transport infrastructure projects.
10. The private sector should be appropriately taxed according to their contribution to the social and economic costs of emissions.
11. The private and public sector should encourage sustainable transport for work-related travel and commuting.
12. Community organisations should advocate to governments for climate adaptation initiatives and take responsibility for their contributions to climate change.
13. Individuals need to prioritise public transport and active travel options over private fossil fuel-based transport.

ACRS actions

1. Raise awareness of the relationship between climate change and road safety among members.
2. Advocate to road safety stakeholders to consider the impact of climate change and road safety.
3. Support the development of the knowledge base for strategies to increase road safety considering climate change.

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