

Opinion editorial

The Mercury

13 July 2018

Trade safe places

Here's a challenge for Tasmanian families with a young driver at home and two or three cars in the driveway. Let's say mum and dad have a new car with anti-lock brakes, air bags, electronic stability control, a strong shell to protect them in a crash. And the teenager, still on their P-plates, has an older vehicle, without these safety features.

Now add another ingredient. Young drivers are significantly over-represented in Tasmania's deaths and serious injury on our roads. Tasmanians between 17 and 25 are 10 per cent of licensed drivers but one-third of serious crash casualties on our roads. Old car. Inexperienced driver. A potentially lethal combination.

Logically, because of the greater risk, the teenager should be behind the wheel of the car loaded with safety features. But how many parents would swap places and take the older car? They could be at greater risk themselves if they do so.

The other possibility is that parents buy a car that does have the latest safety features. Again, that's a financial challenge for many. It's an agonising choice.

The evidence, outlined in a new campaign by the Australian New Car Assessment Program (ANCAP) is compelling. The campaign focuses on what happens to the driver of the 1998 car involved in a crash and the driver of a 2015 car that suffers the same impact. You will find it at <http://www.ancap.com.au/WhoSurvives> and it should be compulsory viewing for young drivers and their parents.

The ANCAP campaign is in line with Tasmania's own 10-year road safety strategy, which centres on safe road users, safe roads and roadsides, safe speeds and safe vehicles. The challenge in this state is that we have the oldest vehicle

fleet in the nation and we are above the national average road crash deaths per 100,000 population and per 10,000 registered vehicles.

The average age of the state's vehicle fleet is 12.8 years compared with 9.8 years nationally. And with Tasmanian incomes the lowest in the nation, it's harder for many to buy with safety in mind.

As ANCAP notes, older vehicles (those built 2000 or earlier) are over-represented in fatal vehicle crashes. They account for 20% of all currently registered vehicles on our roads nationally, but are involved in 33% of fatalities. In contrast, vehicles built between 2011 and 2016 account for 31% of the national fleet, but are involved in just 12% of fatalities. The rate of fatal crashes per registered vehicle for the oldest vehicles is four times higher than that of the newest vehicles.

Australian Automobile Association CEO Michael Bradley cited research showing more than 1300 lives would be saved on Australian roads over the next two decades if Australia reduced the age of its light vehicle fleet by just one year. There are two ways to get safer cars on our roads: lowering taxes on imported vehicles to make five-star rated cars cheaper and encouraging fleet owners – from the rental car giants, to federal, state and local government and private enterprise – to buy only five-star rated vehicles.

From a workplace health and safety perspective, safer vehicles for employees and reinforcing good driving practices should be a no-brainer for every organisation. The Tasmanian Government is leading by example in line with its own road safety strategy. Since July 1, all new government vehicles have to be five-star rated.

That benefits not just state employees but the wider community as these vehicles are turned over and enter the used-vehicle market. For the good news is that there are already affordable five-star rated cars – both new and used – coming on the market.

ANCAP's website gives a comprehensive list of those vehicles and their safety features. That's where young buyers and their parents need to be looking with safety top of mind.

As the evidence outlined by ANCAP shows, buying a car can be life and death decision. But we should not forget that it is just one of the ways to keep safe on our roads.

The best car won't save you if you speed, drive with alcohol and drugs in your system, are distracted, are fatigued or don't wear a seatbelt. Your chances of surviving a crash may be improved but, as the number of serious injuries on our roads show, your life could still be changed – in some cases catastrophically.

Garry Bailey is the Chair of the Road Safety Advisory Council.