

It's official: Australians are bad drivers

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AUSTRALIAN drivers are failing to get the message about road safety, with alarming numbers of motorists admitting they are speeding, sending text messages, making phone calls and driving while tired or drunk.

In the wake of a horror month on Victoria's roads, a Federal Government report to be released today will reveal that speeding remains endemic among Australian drivers.

Based on a survey of 1615 people aged 15 and over, the report said one in four people believe it is acceptable to speed "if you are driving safely", while 11 per cent of people under 25 always or mostly drive at least 10 km/h over the speed limit.

The report also reveals that fatigue remains a major concern on Australian roads.

One of every six people interviewed - 16 per cent - said they had fallen asleep at the wheel, with a disturbing 43 per cent of them having done so more than once. The alarming figures come just days after reports that Victoria's top traffic cop, Deputy Commissioner Ken Lay, was clocked doing 10 km/h over the 70 km/h limit through a country town.

The survey, conducted by the Transport Department's Social Research Centre, found almost two-thirds of people (61 per cent) admitted using their mobile phone while driving, up from 47 per cent in 2005.

It said 16 per cent of drivers send text messages while at the wheel, up from 8 per cent in 2005. Almost one-third, or 30 per cent, read text messages, and 34 per cent make calls.

Transport Minister Anthony Albanese said the report painted an alarming picture; efforts to cut the national road toll were being undermined by drivers' poor behaviour.

Mr Albanese said the need to educate drivers was partly up to governments, but there needed to be community debate on the issue of personal responsibility.

"People text messaging while driving, clearly, are not concentrating on the roads and that represents a risk not only to themselves but to other people who are doing the right thing.

"You can have significant improvements to the safety of our roads and in the safety technology of our vehicles, but the human factor of driver responsibility is the essential component."

Meanwhile, a separate report by the Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics, also to be released today, suggests Australia's annual road toll is in danger of plateauing despite better policing, better roads and safer vehicles.

Last year, Australia recorded 1509 road crash deaths. That was 67 more deaths than in 2008, although still well below the levels that prevailed a decade ago.

Although Victoria's road toll fell last year, the loss of life during the holiday period in December was particularly bad.

During that month, the number of road crash deaths surged by 32 per cent compared with the previous December.

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