11 School Zones and Student Drivers

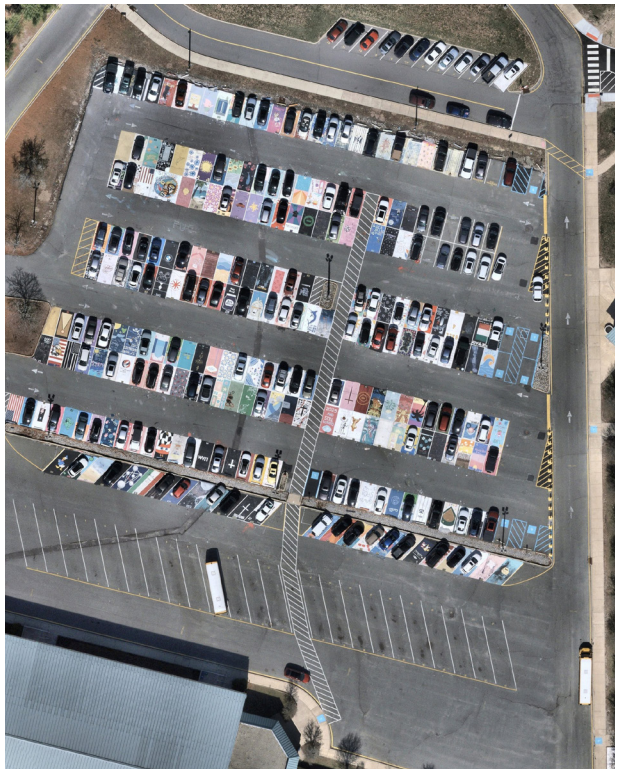
Learning to drive remains a rite of passage for many American teens. For those with access to a car, driving to school can offer a new level of freedom and relieve caregivers from drop-off/pick-up responsibilities, which is why caregivers often support students driving to school. Yet student drivers can also heighten safety risks in school zones, which is why they are an important consideration for school zones, particularly in the high school context.

Introduction

In 2021, the Safe Routes to School (SRTS) program was recodified at the national level through the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA) to include high school students through 12th grade.

While traditionally SRTS efforts have been focused on walking and bicycling, this guide recognizes that student driving also plays an important role in school transportation, particularly for high school students. Student drivers and their travel patterns and decisions can influence traffic flow, parking demand, and safety within school zones.

Understanding how to safely accommodate student drivers is an important component of school zone planning. It is important to continue roadway safety education and engagement in high schools.



The senior student parking lot of Central Regional High School in Bayville, NJ. Seniors are permitted to paint their parking spaces. Image: Nearmap, dated March 18, 2025, accessed February 24, 2026.

HOW OLD DO YOU HAVE TO BE TO DRIVE IN NEW JERSEY?

New Jersey teenagers can obtain a special learner's permit at age 16 if they are enrolled in a behind-the-wheel driver training course offered at either their high school or an independent licensed driving school.

Following an initial exam and behind-the-wheel instruction with a licensed driving instructor, they can receive a probationary driver's license at age 17. Once they turn 18 and have had one year of driving practice, they can upgrade the probationary license to an official basic driver's license.[1]

Note: This chapter references a larger number of citations than other chapters in this guide. For readability purposes, citations are listed in an endnotes section, rather than through footnotes.

Teen Driver Crash Facts

Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death for American teenagers. [2] Per mile driven, national fatal crash rates for teen drivers aged 16-19 are nearly three times those for drivers aged 20 and over, with the risk highest for teens aged 16-17. Male drivers aged 16-19 are at particularly high risk, with a fatal rate three times that of female drivers the same age. [3]

New Jersey-specific statistics generally follow this national pattern. A 2023 report by the Governors Highway Safety Association (GHSA) found that in 2021, the rate of fatal crash involvement per licensed driver was more than twice as high for New Jersey drivers under age 21 as for drivers 21 and over,[4] a finding that likely understates the risk posed by young drivers in New Jersey, since nationally teen drivers log about half as many miles per capita as adult drivers.[5] Additionally, the 2013–2017 New Jersey Young Drivers Report — the most recent such report available — found that male drivers accounted for 55% of crashes of all severities compared to 45% for female drivers. [6]

Over the past two decades, New Jersey has enacted laws and policies that have substantially reduced the risk posed by teen drivers. The same GHSA report found that in 2021 New Jersey had the fourth-lowest fatal crash involvement rate for under-21 drivers in the nation — a 43% decline from 2002. This progress is widely attributed to the state's Graduated Driver Licensing (GDL) law, enacted in 2001 and considered among the most comprehensive in the country. However, despite this progress, fatal crashes involving teen drivers remain unacceptably common. According to the New Jersey Attorney General's Office, there were 77 such crashes in the state in 2024.[7]

Teen Driver Risk Factors

According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), a variety of factors contribute to teen drivers being at higher risk, including: [8]



Inexperience: Due to a lack of experience, teenagers are more likely to underestimate dangerous situations and make critical errors that can lead to serious or fatal crashes.



Not Using Seatbelts: Teenagers tend to buckle up less frequently than adults. Among teen drivers and passengers 16–19 years of age who were killed in car crashes in 2020, 56% were not wearing a seat belt at the time of the crash. [9]



Distractions: Although distractions such as texting or using a cell phone while driving are common among all drivers, they are especially dangerous for younger, inexperienced motorists. Cell phone use is one of the most common distractions, increasing crash or near-crash risk by up to seven times.[10]



Speeding: Teenagers are more likely to speed and allow shorter distances between vehicles. In 2020, 35% of male drivers and 18% of female drivers (ages 15–20 years) who were involved in fatal crashes were speeding at the time of the crash.[11]



Impairment: Driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs significantly increases crash and fatality risk. In 2020, 29% of drivers ages 15–20 who were killed in motor vehicle crashes had been drinking.

Many of these risk factors are linked to teens' developing brains. The prefrontal cortex - the part of the brain that correlates with decision-making and risk-taking - is not fully developed until age 25.[12] This results in heightened risk seeking, greater susceptibility to peer pressure, and greater susceptibility to distraction, all of which contribute to unsafe driving behaviors. Adolescent biorhythms are also different than adults, and teenagers experience fatigue and drowsy driving more than older motorists.

Teen Driver Crash Types and Contributing Circumstances

According to a 2014 study of nationally representative crash causation data provided by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, teen drivers are involved in certain crash types more often than adults. The image on the right shows the top five teen crash types nationally and the share of serious teen and adult crashes for each type.[13] As shown in the figure, teen drivers appear more likely than adult drivers to be involved in:

- rear-end crashes,
- turning left into the path of an oncoming vehicle, and
- the two roadway departure crash types.

According the 2014 study, the propensity of young drivers to be involved in these crash types is related to the risk factors described above. For example, teens are more likely to be involved in rear-end crashes because they tend to follow too closely and are more easily distracted. Likewise, teens are more likely to be involved in roadway departure crashes because they tend to overcompensate through lack of experience.

These conclusions are generally supported by statistics from the 2013–2017 New Jersey Young Drivers Report indicating that "driver inattention" was the single most reported circumstance contributing to young driver crashes, reported as a factor in 39% of teen driver crashes, followed by "following too closely," reported in 12% of crashes (Page 163).[14] Speeding is another critical safety issue for teen drivers. According to the New Jersey Attorney General's Office, in 2024, speeding was a factor in 33% of fatal crashes involving a teen driver.[15]

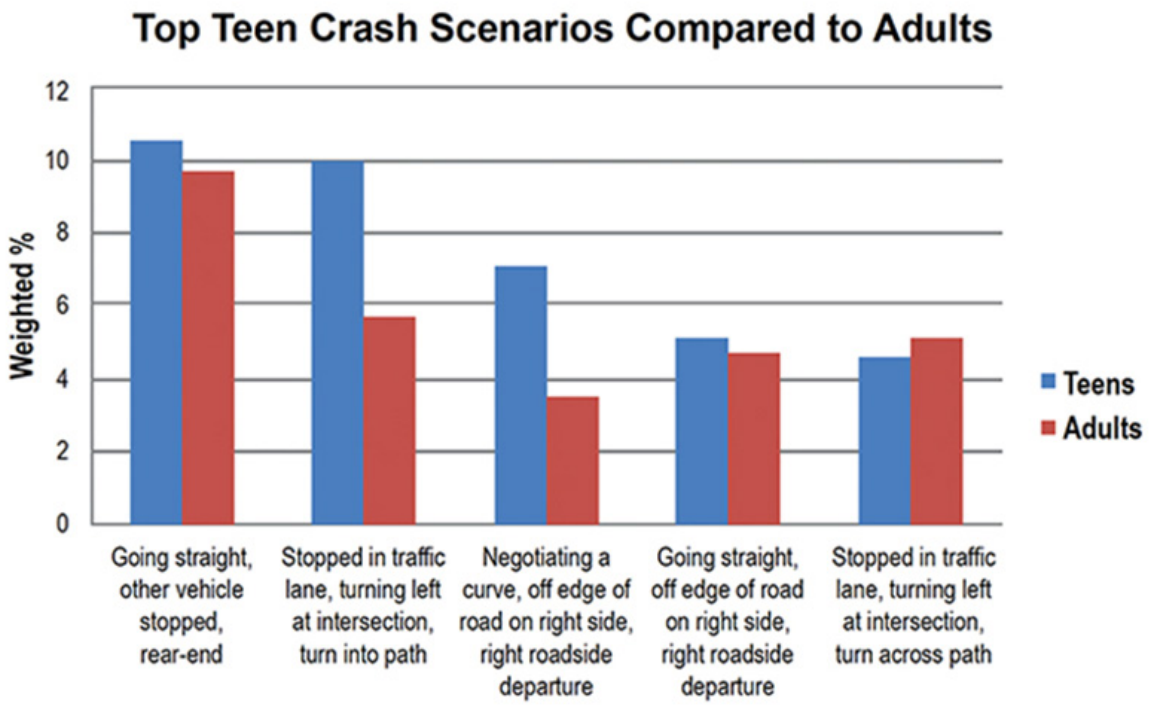


Image: McDonald, Catherine C., et al. "comparison of teen and adult driver crash scenarios in a nationally representative sample of serious crashes." Accident Analysis & Prevention, vol. 72, Nov. 2014, pp. 302–308. ScienceDirect, ScienceDirect, *https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aap.2014.07.016.*

	CONTRIBUTING CIRCUMSTANCE	
DRIVER ACTION	DRIVER INATTENTION	16,239
	FOLLOWING TOO CLOSELY	4,992
	FAILED TO YIELD ROW TO VEHICLE/PEDESTRIAN	3,391
	UNSAFE SPEED	2,856
	IMPROPER LANE CHANGE	1,508
	IMPROPER TURNING	1,045
	BACKING UNSAFELY	943
	FAILED TO OBEY TRAFFIC SIGNAL	817
	OTHER DRIVER/PEDALCYCLIST ACTION	702
	FAILED TO OBEY STOP SIGN	591
	IMPROPER PASSING	565
	OTHER DISTRACTION INSIDE VEHICLE	383
	DISTRACTED - HAND HELD ELECTRONIC DEVICE	227
	FAILURE TO KEEP RIGHT	218
	OTHER DISTRACTION OUTSIDE VEHICLE	174
	IMPROPER PARKING	70
	DISTRACTED - HANDS FREE ELECTRONIC DEVICE	63
	DISTRACTED BY PASSENGER	62
	IMPROPER USE/FAILED TO USE TURN SIGNAL	56
	WRONG WAY	52
	IMPROPER USE/NO LIGHTS	20
	FAILURE TO REMOVE SNOW/ICE	6
VEHICLE FACTORS	BRAKES	280
	TIRES	140
	OTHER VEHICLE FACTORS	118
	STEERING	84
	WHEELS	45
	WINDOWS/WINDSHIELD	27
	MIRRORS	5
	VEHICLE COUPLING/HITCH/SAFETY CHAINS	5
	DEFECTIVE LIGHTS	4
	SEPARATED LOAD/SPILL	3
	WIPERS	0

	CONTRIBUTING CIRCUMSTANCE	
ROAD/ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS	ROAD SURFACE CONDITION	1,452
	ANIMALS IN ROADWAY	644
	SUNGLARE	136
	OBSTRUCTION/DEBRIS IN ROAD	101
	PHYSICAL OBSTRUCTIONS (VIEWING, ETC)	62
	TRAFFIC CONGESTION - REGULAR	56
	OTHER ROADWAY FACTORS	47
	RUTS, HOLES, BUMPS	33
	TRAFFIC CONGESTION - PRIOR INCIDENT	26
	CONTROL DEVICE DEFECTIVE OR MISSING	9
	IMPROPER WORK ZONE	3
	IMPROPER/INADEQUATE LANE MAKINGS	0
PEDESTRIAN FACTORS	OTHER PEDESTRIAN FACTORS	0
	NONE	0
	WALKING IN ROAD WHEN SIDEWALKS PRESENT	0
	WALKING ON WRONG SIDE OF ROAD	0
	FALURE TO YIELD ROW	0
	RUNNING/DARTING ACROSS TRAFFIC	0
	INATTENTIVE	0
	DARK CLOTHING/LOW VISIBILITY TO DRIVE	0
	CROSSING WHERE PROHIBITED	0
	FAILED TO OBEY TRAFFIC CONTROL DEVICE	0
OTHER	UNKNOWN	799
	OTHER	238
	NONE	11,603

Contributing Circumstances of Young Drivers in Crashes (n = 41,816), 2017. Image: 2013 - 2017 New Jersey Young Drivers Report

Ways to Mitigate Teen Driver Crash Risks through Design

The risk factors and crash types associated with teen drivers can be reduced through the thoughtful design or retrofit of school campuses and surrounding streets. This is particularly important given the high concentration of student pedestrians and cyclists, who—like student drivers—are relatively inexperienced, more prone to distraction, and thus more likely to misjudge situations and make mistakes.

School Campus Design

Strategies for mitigating teen driver crash risks through school campus design focus on reducing driver speeds, reducing the number of potential conflict points between student drivers and vulnerable road users, and ensuring pedestrian and cyclist crossings are highly visible and encourage driver yielding. Recommended strategies include:

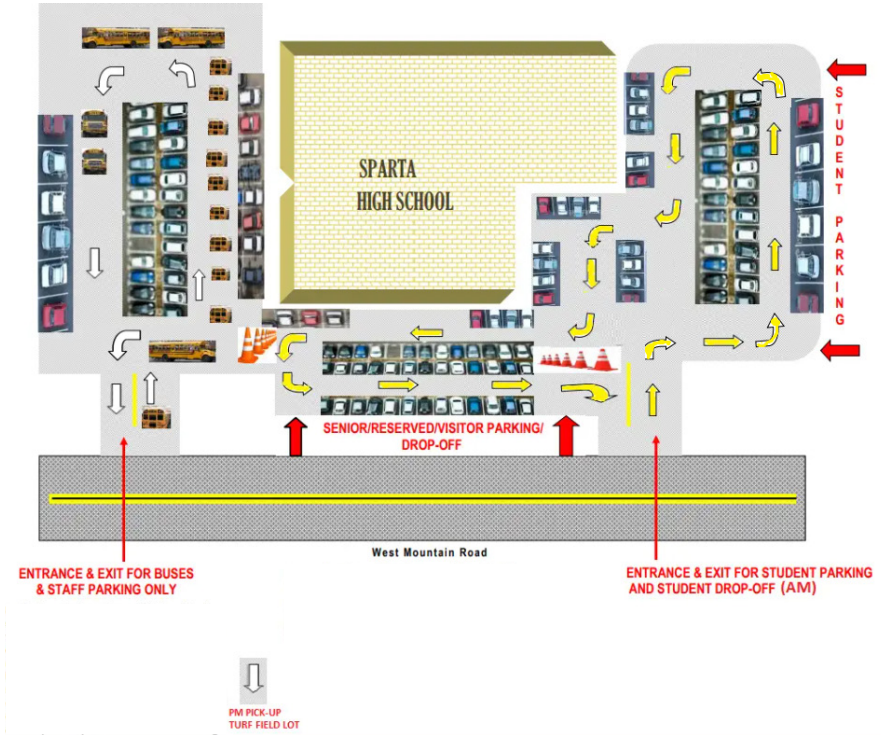
- Separate student driver routes from bus loops, pick-up/drop-off zones, pedestrian and bicyclist routes, and parking areas:
  - Provide a separate ingress/egress on school campuses for student drivers where feasible.
  - Locate bicycle parking away from student parking areas.
- Use one-way circulation and channelization to simplify movements and make them more predictable.
- Locate student parking areas away from school buildings to reduce student driver traffic along the building frontage, where pedestrians are most concentrated.
- Design parking aisles and circulation roads for lower speeds, supported by signage, pavement markings, and traffic-calming measures.
  - Speed limits in campus parking lots should be set at 5 mph and clearly indicated with signage and pavement markings.
  - Traffic-calming measures can include raised crosswalks, speed tables, speed humps, curb extensions, and avoidance of long straightaways.



Parking aisles and circulation roads for lower-speed circulation at Collingswood High School, NJ.



Separated parking space for Collingswood High School, NJ.



Separated one-way circulation at Sparta High School, NJ. Image: Sparta High School Traffic Control Plan

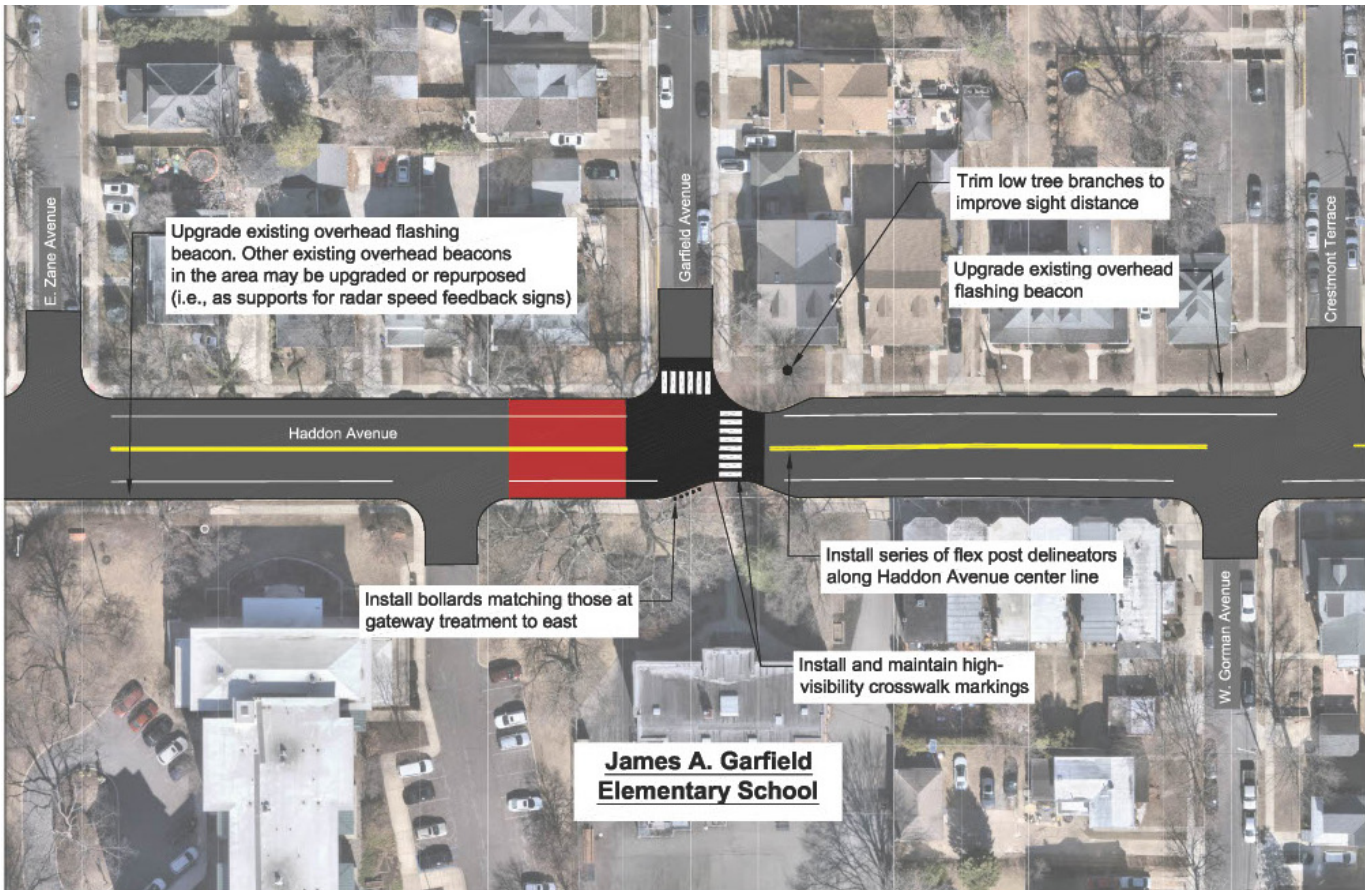
- Provide separated pedestrian pathways and marked crosswalks along key pedestrian desire lines between school entrances and drop-off/pick-up zones, transit stops, and pedestrian facilities on adjacent streets.
  - Pathways and crosswalks should be ADA-compliant.
  - Pathways should be separated from roadways by curbs.
  - Crosswalks should be marked with high-visibility crosswalk markings, provide clear, unobstructed sightlines between drivers and crossing pedestrians, and include physical measures to encourage driver yielding and reduce pedestrian exposure, such as raised crosswalks, curb extensions, pedestrian refuge islands, signage and RRFBs.

- Provide good lighting at campus entry and exit locations, in parking lots, along pedestrian pathways, and at crosswalks to support safety during early mornings, evenings, and special events.

School Zone Street Design

Similar strategies can be implemented on adjacent streets and key pedestrian and bicycling access routes to mitigate teen driver crash risks.

- Work with local and state authorities to implement traffic calming on school approaches.
- Design pedestrian crossings near schools to slow drivers and increase vulnerable road user visibility.
  - Measures such as high-visibility markings, leading pedestrian intervals (LPIs), pedestrian refuge islands, speed tables, and curb extensions should be explored.
- Provide adequate, quality lighting.
- Implement separated pedestrian and bicycling facilities.



James A. Garfield Elementary School Street design engineering on Hadden Ave, Collingswood, NJ.
Image: Borough of Collingswood Safe Routes to School Travel Plan

Ways to Mitigate Teen Driver Crash Risks through Policies, Programs, and Education

Schools can mitigate student driver crash risks through a variety of policies and programs, including:

- Encourage other transportation modes.
  - These can include walking, rolling, bicycling, school buses, and public transportation.

- Provide free or discounted public transit passes to students.
  - Arlington Transit (ART) and Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority (WMATA) provide free Metrobus routes for public school students in Arlington, Virginia via the iRide Student Fare Free Program. [16]
  - Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) provides local school districts with Student Fare Cards for qualifying students to travel to and from school on any modes of public transit. [17]

- Make student driving less attractive through parking and operational policies.
  - Require permits for student parking, limit their number, and charge a fee. The funds collected can be applied to strategies supporting non-car modes, such as free or discounted transit passes.
  - Dismiss student drivers from school last, which can also reduce conflicts between student drivers and other vulnerable road users (pedestrians, bicyclists, bus riders, etc.) during peak dismissal times. Alternatively, give early dismissal to students who walk or bike to school.

- Provide behind-the-wheel driver training courses in high schools to help students satisfy state driver's license requirements and involve caregivers.
  - Some public high schools have removed these courses, forcing students into private driving schools, which can be expensive and inequitable.
  - Caregivers can help reinforce safety messages.

- Emphasize driver safety.
  - Require students and their caregivers to sign a safe driver pledge, e.g., to always wear a seatbelt, avoid using cell phones and other distractions while driving, comply with speed limits and other traffic laws, limit other teen passengers, etc.
  - Specify that parking permits and other privileges will be revoked for unsafe behaviors or failure to follow rules.

- Support school staff and be consistent with enforcement.
  - Administrators and teachers often help with compliance with rules in school zones and should have support to enforce the rules consistently.

- Provide education on pedestrian, bicycle, e-bike, and micromobility safety.
  - As identified in the Target Zero Action Plan, proposed legislation would establish comprehensive Pre-K-12 road safety education, helping students understand vulnerable road user safety and potentially reducing teen driving crashes.

Conclusion

Teen drivers are a critical group to consider when planning and designing safe school zones, particularly at high schools where many students are newly licensed and beginning to drive independently. By coordinating policies, programs, education, and design strategies around high school campuses and adjacent streets, communities can reduce crash risks and create a safer environment for all road users.

ENDNOTES

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