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New vehicle technologies and extension of EU infrastructure safety rules could prevent thousands of collisions on motorways

New safety technologies could play a major role in bringing the numbers killed on European motorways down, according to the European Transport Safety Council (ETSC), authors of a new report published today. The report was welcomed by the UK Parliamentary transport safety group.

The new analysis of developments in motorway safety shows that, despite recent progress, around 1900 people were killed on motorways in the EU in 2013. This includes 100 deaths in Great Britain.

In several countries up to 60% of those killed in motorway collisions were not wearing a seatbelt. The authors – which include Professor Richard Allsop of University College London – call on the EU to require the mandatory installation of intelligent seat belt reminder systems (SBR) for all passenger seats in new cars. Currently only driver seats are required to be fitted with an SBR.

The authors recommend the EU requires the installation of intelligent speed assistance (ISA) and lane departure warning systems (LDWS) in new vehicles. Assisting ISA is an overridable in-car system that uses GPS data and sign-recognition cameras to help drivers stick to speed limits. The technology could cut deaths overall by 20%. LDW systems alert the driver if they drift out of their lane, a sign of fatigue or distraction that can be fatal; it is already mandatory for new lorries and buses.

Antonio Avenoso, Executive Director of ETSC said:

“Technologies that can step in to help the driver avoid catastrophe have the potential to save thousands of lives on our roads. But as the world begins to envisage a future of fully-automated vehicles, an EU-backed push for these intermediate technologies will also help keep the European automotive sector on the cutting edge of a market that risks being dominated by competition from large technology firms based outside Europe.”

David Davies, Executive Director of PACTS, added:

“Car safety technologies, such as intelligent seat belt reminders, would benefit UK drivers too. Recent figures from TRL show seatbelt wearing by children has fallen since 2009.”

The report also highlights the need for the European Union to do more to reduce the numbers of people killed on urban and rural roads as figures show motorway deaths are falling faster than deaths on the rest of the road network. Between 2004 and 2013, the number of people killed on motorways in the EU decreased by 8% per year on average, compared to 6.5% on other roads.

To narrow the gap, the authors recommend extending EU infrastructure safety rules, which currently apply mainly to Europe’s major motorways, to the rest of the road network. The European Commission is set to publish an update to that legislation later this year.

In particular the authors cite road safety audits - independent technical checks aimed at identifying unsafe features of a road - as a key element in EU infrastructure rules that is helping to save lives and should therefore also be applied to other roads. Road safety impact assessments for new projects, treatment of high-risk sites on existing roads and regular safety inspections as part of maintenance work are also crucial. Independent research highlighted in the report indicates that these measures can cut collisions by up to 20%.

For countries where death rates can be calculated based on traffic volume, the worst performing countries have a risk factor four times higher than the best countries. Denmark, Great Britain, Sweden and the Netherlands have the safest motorways while those in Poland, Hungary and Lithuania have the highest level of risk.

Avenoso commented:

“This report shows that while road safety is improving overall, the benefits of new measures are not being felt equally. There are still big differences between member states. It’s up to the EU to help ensure that safety improvements reach further and faster.”

David Davies, Executive Director of PACTS, said:

“We welcome this report on improving motorway safety in Europe. The UK’s motorway network is one of the safest in Europe. UK drivers travelling abroad will want to see motorways in the rest of the EU that are equally safe. It would be irresponsible to throw away the UK’s good safety record by increasing motorway speed limits.

“Highways England, which replaces the Highways Agency from 1st April, has an ambitious target to reduce death serious injuries by 40% by 2020 and a long-term vision that nobody is harmed on the strategic road network. Additional measure will be needed to achieve this, including safety management. Many motorists make unnecessary stops on the hard shoulder, which is highly dangerous and this needs to be managed more actively. Safety cameras are essential for managing traffic on SMART motorways.”

Notes to editors:

The report, ‘Ranking EU Progress on Improving Motorway safety’ is based on analysis of EU data supported by a panel of 32 road safety experts from across Europe. The full report can be downloaded from www.etsc.eu/pin

The European Transport Safety Council, is an independent, non-profit organisation dedicated to reducing the numbers of deaths and injuries in transport in Europe. www.etsc.eu PACTS is a founder member of ETSC

PACTS - The Parliamentary Advisory Council for Transport Safety (an All-Party Parliamentary Group) is also a registered charity. Its charitable objective is “To protect human life through the promotion of transport safety for the public benefit”.

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