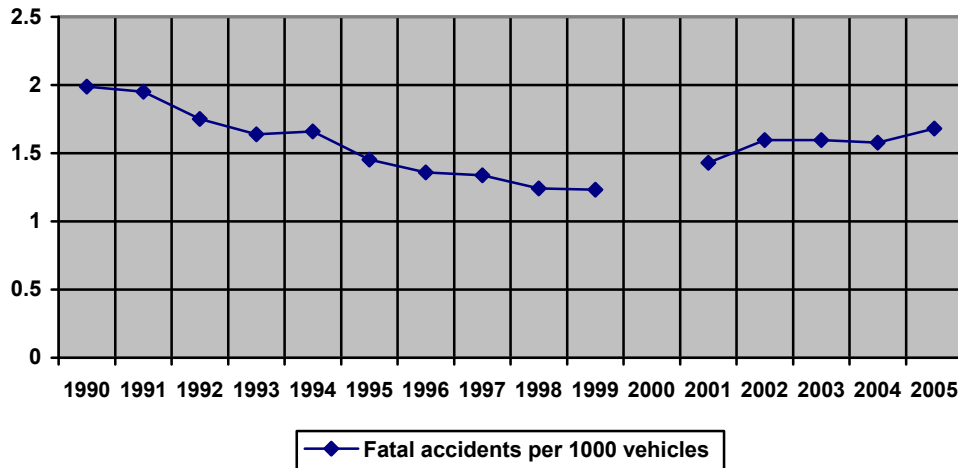


Yellow-line driving law encourages dangerous overtaking?

As we enter the holiday season, the "December road death toll" is in the news again. Yet few people know that fatal road accidents per 1000 vehicles followed a decreasing trend for eight years, before increasing again from 1998.

Measuring fatal accidents per 1000 cars helps to show trends while taking into account the increasing number of vehicles on the road. The trend toward an increase in fatal accidents per 1000 vehicles seems set to continue this year. Why did the fatal accident rate start rising from about 1998?

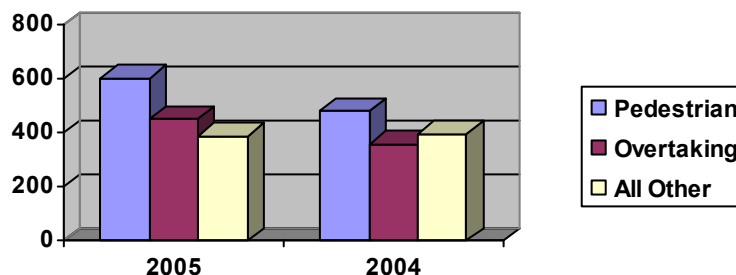


Source: Road Traffic Management Corporation

Most analysts say the increase in the fatal accident rate relates to driver behaviour, but there has been little analysis of why driver behaviour has worsened since 1998.

A closer look at the data shows that overtaking is to blame for a significant proportion of fatalities. About a third of all road accident fatalities recorded in December 2005 were as a result of overtaking-related accidents.

December fatalities by type of crash



Source: Road Traffic Management Corporation

One of many possible causes of worsened driver behaviour presents itself. Yellow-line (emergency-lane or shoulder) driving was illegal until the law was changed in July 1995 to allow for limited yellow-line driving – could the reverse in

the decreasing trend of fatal accidents from 1998 be related to the arrogant driver behaviour encouraged by the change in the law?

Most careful drivers would today attest to the fact that driving at or below the speed limit on national roads is a nerve-wracking affair, with faster vehicles almost without exception flashing lights or driving with little following distance in an attempt to force slower vehicles to move over.

Yet few are aware that the legal limits of yellow-line driving are quite narrow. The law provides that the driver of a vehicle may drive on the shoulder of a road which is not a freeway during daylight hours only while the vehicle is being overtaken, only if this can be done without endangering anyone, and only if persons and vehicles are discernable for a distance of at least 150 metres.

Yet motorists are regularly intimidated to move over when there is no such clear view, even though there may be unseen pedestrians, unsafe road surfaces or broken down vehicles within the yellow line but out of immediate sight – for example, around a bend, over a rise, or in poor visibility.

The 150m visible distance required is a slightly greater distance than the length of a rugby field – but a distance of 150m will be closed in just over 2 seconds where two vehicles are travelling at 120km/h in opposite directions.

Pedestrian fatalities are also not, as many like to think, just about drunks falling into the road – pedestrians walking within the yellow line are frequently struck. Thus the law expressly forbids travelling inside the yellow lane at night. Travelling inside the yellow line on a freeway is also illegal.

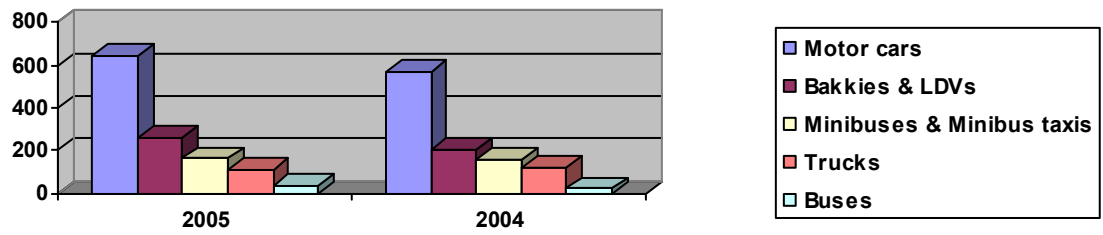
For overtaking vehicles, the law has always and continues to forbid attempting to overtake when approaching the summit of a rise, a curve, or any other place where the drivers' view is restricted so that a hazard might be created. Under these conditions, vehicles should not be in the yellow line either.

The only time it is therefore legal and safe to drive in the yellow line is when it would be safe in any event for an overtaking motorist to overtake – when both motorists have a clear daytime view of the road ahead for the full overtaking distance. Slower vehicles pulling over in such conditions is a courtesy, not an imperative.

Internationally, legal yellow line driving is not the norm. For example, the United Kingdom Highway Code, which applies to all UK roads, expressly forbids driving on the shoulder unless in an emergency or under police direction.

South African motorists appear not to have been able to grasp the limitations on the legal and safe use of either yellow-line driving or overtaking in general. Certainly, there is much denial about the risks of overtaking – motorists like to blame un-roadworthy taxis and buses for the shocking numbers of road fatalities, certainly not relating road fatalities to their own driving behaviour. But ordinary motor-cars continue to account for more fatal crashes and more actual fatalities than any other vehicle-type.

Vehicles involved in fatal crashes by type (December)



Source: Road Traffic Management Corporation

An awareness campaign focussing on the dangers of overtaking – including the legal limits of yellow line driving – is urgently required. But such a campaign will be too late for this season's dead.

Jean Redpath
14 December 2006