

Rise in child road deaths

TWO UCT researchers have joined forces in a bid to reduce child injuries and fatalities on South African roads. The Centre for Transport Studies Professor Marianne Vanderschuren and Professor Sebastian van As, a paediatric surgeon and head of the trauma unit at the Red Cross War Memorial Children's Hospital are combining their expertise to provide insights into child behaviour, the built environment, and how these would contribute to lessening child injuries and fatalities on the road.

Their analysis showed that for every road accident in the Western Cape's rural areas, there were four in the Cape Town metropole. Vanderschuren said fatalities in rural and urban areas were an almost 50/50 split. "The number of fatalities from road traffic accidents is roughly 17 000 people annually, and 47 daily. Pedestrians account for 40% of road deaths in Cape Town." She said about 52 children died on Cape Town's roads last year, within the first 24 hours following the crash. "Another 30 died from their injuries at a later stage. Over the Easter weekend in Cape Town, 38 people died. This was a 14% increase since 2017."

The team identified poor planning around land-use as another significant contributor to fatalities, and said: "One way this plays out is when children travel to school, crossing busy roads, such as the R300, to reach their schools on the other side. "Bridges are a solution, but are often badly designed and harbour criminals. This forces children and other pedestrians to risk crossing busy roads, because many children have to walk to school. The entire area around the school must include traffic-calming facilities, such as signage and raised pedestrian crossings." She said another example was the design of street corners. "A large radius accommodates high speeds and increases the distance that pedestrians need to overcome. Where in Cape Town have the street corners been changed to make them more pedestrian-friendly? "I cannot think of one," she said. The lack of lighting, they said, was a major challenge at rural intersections, where parents often travel in the early hours of the morning to take their children to school on their way to work.

According to their research, changing the way schools were planned and built was one solution. "It can be as simple as moving the entrance to a quieter, safer side of the school grounds," she said. Another was the implementing of traffic-calming techniques around schools such as raised pedestrian crossings, clear signage, and pavements.

They said children were forced to play on the only available grass areas alongside highways and arterial roads, putting them at risk of being seriously injured or knocked down and killed by a vehicle.