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NATIONAL POLICY BRIEF FOR CHILD ROAD INJURY PREVENTION IN SOUTH AFRICA

Reducing Speed, Saving Lives.

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Background

Road traffic injuries are a leading cause of death among children and adolescents in South Africa.

Road traffic injuries are a leading cause of death among children and adolescents in South Africa, with the Western Cape accounting for 12% of all fatal crashes (1). In Cape Town alone, 103 of the 740 road traffic crash victims in 2020 were children (2). Child pedestrians are particularly vulnerable (1). While all child pedestrians need protection, the journey to school warrants special attention. With walking the main travel mode for most learners, it's vital to scale up safety measures based on the Safe System Approach (SSA), which includes five pillars: safe road users, safe vehicles, safe speeds, safe roads, and post-crash care.

In the Western Cape, the Safe System Approach was applied by the Walking Safely to School Project (WATCH), led by ChildSafe South Africa with UNICEF support. This multi-sectoral intervention aimed to reduce child pedestrian injuries by creating safer school zones. It combined road infrastructure upgrades and advocacy for a default 30km/h speed limit with road safety education for children, teachers, and communities. This policy brief reflects on the Traffic Calming component and offers recommendations based on literature review and stakeholder feedback.

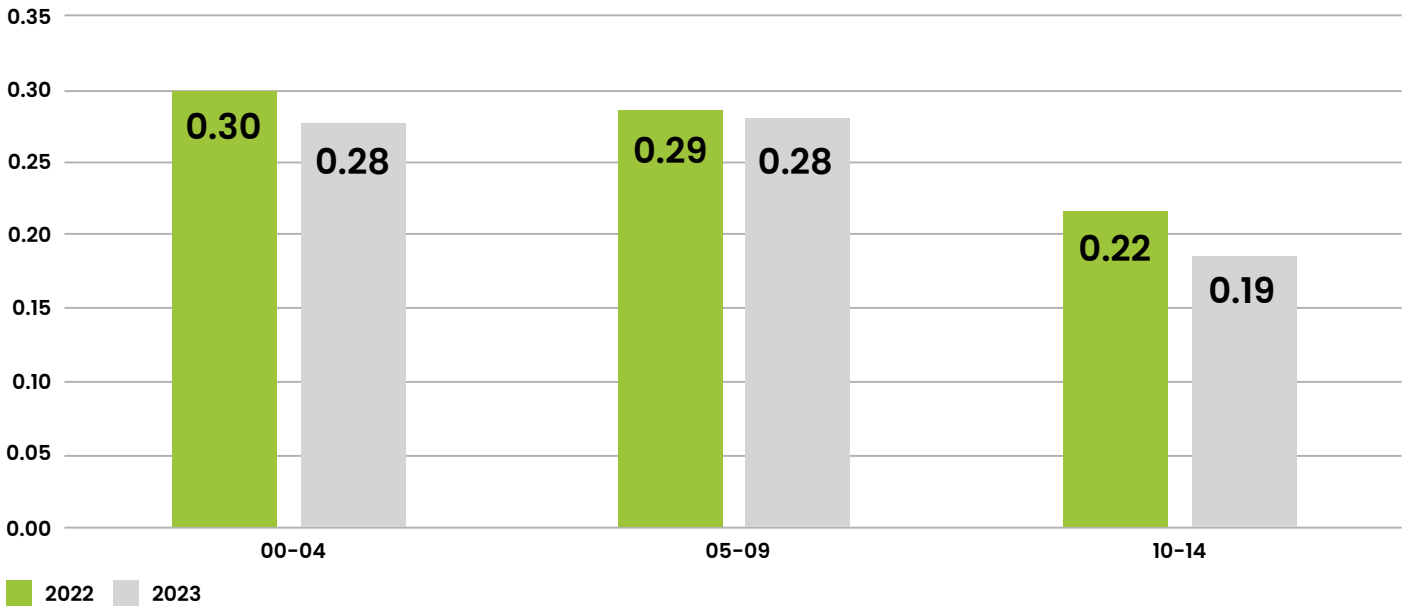
The Safe System Approach

Burden of Road Traffic Fatalities

Globally, injuries from road crashes are the leading cause of death for children and young adults (3–5). Low- and middle-income countries account for 97% of child deaths caused by road injuries (4).

In South Africa, road crashes are the second most common cause of death for 0-14-year-olds (6). Pedestrians of all ages in the country are at the greatest risk of death with 45% of all road fatalities being pedestrians. 16% of all pedestrian deaths in South Africa involved children aged between 0-14 years (1). As walking is the primary mode of travel for most learners in the country (7), they are particularly vulnerable to road safety issues (1).

Rate of Fatalities per 100,000 Population (Age 0-14 years)



Source: Road Traffic Management Corporation, 2024, The State of Road Safety in South Africa (1)

Key Risk Factors:

Literature identifies the following key risks for child road-related injuries:

1

Pedestrian Vulnerability

A large share of child road fatalities involve pedestrians. Contributing factors include high vehicle speeds (urban speed limit is 60 km/h), heavy traffic, lack of pavements, and poor lane demarcations.

Risk also rises with higher numbers of child pedestrians in an area (8). In 2023, approximately 66% of school-going children in South Africa walked to school (7).

2

Age and Developmental Factors

Younger children are less visible and behave unpredictably in traffic, often struggling to grasp complex road environments. Older children, especially adolescents, may overestimate their ability to navigate traffic and face peer pressure to take risks (8,9)

3

Environmental and Structural Challenges

Many children live in areas without sidewalks or safe crossings, forcing them to walk on roadsides or cross dangerous intersections - conditions that significantly increase injury risk (8).

4

Socioeconomic Disparities

Children from low-income households are more likely to live in high-risk areas with poor road safety infrastructure, heightening their vulnerability to traffic injuries (10).

Addressing these risk factors requires a comprehensive approach, rooted in the multisectoral SSA, including improving infrastructure, implementing targeted road safety education, enforcing traffic regulations and the adoption of a speed reduction policy to create safer environments for children and adolescents (3–5). This policy brief is especially focused on the speed reduction aspect of the SSA.

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66%

of school-going children in South Africa walked to school.

Walking Safely to School project in the Belhar-Delft area / Stellenbosch Arterial

During 2022-2024, 14 schools in the Belhar-Delft area took part in ChildSafe SA's **Walking Safely to School (WATCH)** project, a multi-year, multi-partner project supported by UNICEF and in collaboration with the City of Cape Town Municipality, Western Cape Education Department and Western Cape Department of Mobility.

WATCH aims to enhance road safety for school children in South Africa. The initiative focuses on improving road infrastructure around schools — such as installing speed humps, stop signs, and pedestrian crossings — to create safer road environments for learners. Educational programs are also conducted to raise awareness among students, teachers, and communities about road safety practices.

This includes, for instance, education of young scholars on how to cross the road and first aid training for educators. Additionally, the project advocates for **reducing speed limits in school zones to 30 km/h** - with enforcement - to further protect child pedestrians.

This policy brief highlights lessons from implementing traffic calming measures at six Western Cape schools participating in ChildSafe SA's WATCH programme.

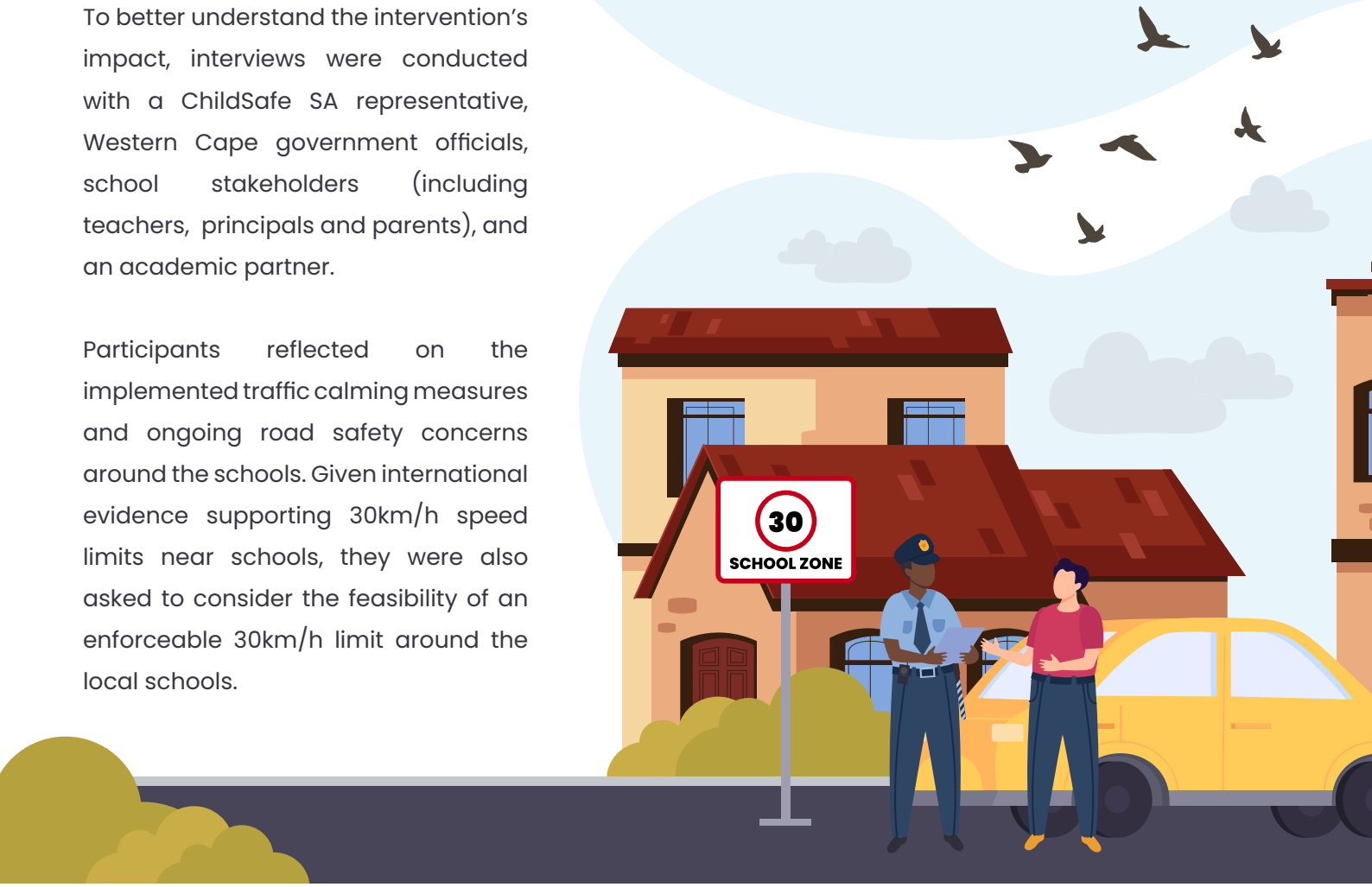
City engineers and ChildSafe SA conducted road safety audits at 14 schools; improvements were recommended for four, and two others requested modifications.

All six received either speed humps or raised pedestrian crossings. The project focused on schools along a high-risk stretch of the Stellenbosch Arterial - between the R300 highway and Jakes Gerwel - a high-speed, high-traffic route posing serious risks to pedestrians, particularly learners crossing between Delft and Belhar.

Schools near the arterial were prioritised due to the high likelihood of learners needing to cross it.

To better understand the intervention's impact, interviews were conducted with a ChildSafe SA representative, Western Cape government officials, school stakeholders (including teachers, principals and parents), and an academic partner.

Participants reflected on the implemented traffic calming measures and ongoing road safety concerns around the schools. Given international evidence supporting 30km/h speed limits near schools, they were also asked to consider the feasibility of an enforceable 30km/h limit around the local schools.



Why focus on a 30km/hour speed limit?

Globally, vehicle speed is recognised as a key factor in pedestrian safety, especially for children.

Studies show pedestrian survival drops sharply as impact speed increases: adult pedestrians have a 99% survival rate at 30 km/h, but only 80% at 50 km/h (11). A 1% rise in average speed raises the risk of fatal crashes by 4% and serious crashes by 3% (12). Children are particularly vulnerable due to their size, unpredictable movements, and limited cognitive skills (4).

Those under 10 are twice as likely to die from road traffic injuries as adults (13). Keeping speeds at or below 30 km/h significantly improves child survival (4,11,14), especially in low- and middle-income countries, where most speeding-related deaths occur (15). Globally, 30 km/h zones are linked to a 70% drop in fatal child pedestrian injuries (4) and reduce overall risks of injuries, collisions, and deaths (16–18).

Urgent Need for Speed-Reducing Measures Near Schools

The research confirms that excessive speed near schools continues to endanger learners, as many drivers fail to slow down in school zones. Inadequate enforcement, a shortage of speed-calming measures and a lack of awareness contribute to the risks for learners.

When you have a person that is driving fast and does not have control over the vehicle, that is the recipe for disaster. And it can be fatal (Educator).

Key Safety Concerns from the perspective of stakeholders:

Disregard for Traffic Laws

Illegal parking, stopping on pedestrian crossings, and failure to follow school drop-off protocols create hazardous conditions. There is a need to work towards a mindset change among drivers.

Unsafe Pedestrian Behaviour

Many learners and parents do not use pedestrian crossings, and some young children walk to school unsupervised. More work is needed to build stronger awareness of safer road use.

Lack of Safe Infrastructure

High-traffic roads near schools pose serious risks: they lack points where people can cross safely; designated drop-off zones are often missing, forcing learners to navigate dangerous conditions.

Irregular Law Enforcement

Insufficient traffic policing means educators take on traffic management roles without enforcement authority. A lack of enforcement results in road users not adjusting their behaviour.

Infrastructure Planning Oversights

School expansions and new developments often neglect planning for road safety. Road infrastructure is not always adjusted and child-friendly design may be overlooked. This worsens congestion and risk.

Limited Pedestrian Facilities

In lower-income areas, a lack of sidewalks and crossings forces learners to walk on busy roads.

Unregulated School Transport

Many learners rely on unlicensed, overcrowded, and reckless transport providers, with little oversight or accountability. More work is needed to ensure that vehicles carrying children are roadworthy, safe and regulated.

The current South African legislative context

South Africa's road network is governed by a framework of legislation and policies designed to ensure road safety and efficiency.

While the **National Road Traffic Act of 1996 (NRTA)** supports traffic calming measures to reduce speeds, local municipalities handle specific implementation based on their needs. The NRTA sets general speed limits: **60 km/h on urban roads, 100 km/h on rural roads,120 km/h on freeways** (19).

60 km/h on urban roads **100 km/h on rural roads** **120 km/h on freeways**

South Africa's National Road Safety Strategy (2016–2030) adopts a Safe System approach, aiming to halve fatal and serious crashes by 2030. The strategy includes stricter enforcement against speeding, safer road design, behavioural change and secure and sustainable learner transport policies - all aimed at protecting vulnerable road users, especially children (20).

South Africa's road safety framework aligns with **SDG 3.6** (halving road fatalities by 2030) and **SDG 11.2** (safe, inclusive transport) through improved traffic management, enforcement, and safer infrastructure, particularly for vulnerable groups. These efforts also support the **UN Global Plan for Road Safety (2021–2030)**.

Policy Recommendations: Strengthening Road Safety Near Schools

Introducing and Enforcing Stricter Speed Limits

A 30km/h speed limit near schools is widely supported by stakeholders. However, speed limits alone are not enough: additional interventions such as stricter enforcement, behaviour change, speed humps and safe crossings, are also urgently needed.

To make a 30km/h speed limit a reality, stakeholders highlighted some critical pathways:

1

Amendment To Exisiting Legislation

The National Road Traffic Act of 1996 sets the urban speed limit at 60km/h; therefore, a legal amendment is needed to enforce 30km/h zones around schools. In the absence of this, only non-enforceable advisory limits can currently be posted in the school zones. Pilot projects testing enforced 30km/h limits in selected school areas could provide evidence to support the legislative change.

2

Strengthening enforcement mechanisms and increasing awareness

Even with a legal framework for lower speed limits, **consistent enforcement and consequences for violations** are essential.

"It mustn't just be a speed limit that is set up; it is insignificant if not controlled." (Educator)

"Our main issue is culture and the perception of road safety. If we simply change the speed from 60 to 30, you will just have more people driving over the speed limit than you have now." (Western Cape government stakeholder)

Given budget and resource constraints, **enforcement must be innovative and integrated into a broader approach** that includes awareness-raising and behaviour change.

3

The creation of clear "school zones", including effective speed reduction measures

Beyond legislation and enforcement, awareness of the "school zone" and the implementation of **physical traffic calming measures** continue to play a crucial role.

"The extra speed bump is a good thing for me as a parent because it helps reduce the drivers' speed. Before the speed bump, drivers would just speed." (Parent).

However, participants stressed that while raised pedestrian crossings have improved safety around schools, they are insufficient alone. Stakeholders recommended additional measures, including clearly recognisable school zones using tactile and visual cues such as signage, distinctive colours, fences, and flashing beacons. They also proposed installing automated speed reminders, speed humps, cameras, pedestrian-activated traffic lights, and ensuring regular maintenance of existing infrastructure.

4

Aligning Pedestrian Safety Infrastructure with Road Classification Policies

Stakeholders recommended additional pedestrian safety measures such as the installation of pedestrian bridges over high-traffic roads like the Stellenbosch Arterial.

It would be essential to **consider road classification policies** that determine **which types of roads** are eligible for certain interventions, and to ensure alignment between road authorities and urban planners.

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