

Spotlight on the invisible road toll

Falls are a major public health problem. However previous research has focused on falls in and around the home and in aged-care facilities. To date there have been no Australian studies addressing falls and fall-related injuries while walking in public spaces.

Victoria Walks' falls research

In 2015 Victoria Walks, with the support of VicHealth, commissioned the Monash University Accident Research Centre (MUARC) to fill the gap in knowledge around falls. The resulting report [Fall-related Injuries While Walking in Victoria](#) was prepared by Dr Jennie Oxley and Steve O'Hern from MUARC, with input from Duane Burt and Dr Ben Rossiter of Victoria Walks.

This Australian-first study included:

- A rapid targeted review of national and international literature
- Examination of hospital admissions and Emergency Department (ED) presentations as a result of falls while walking in the street environment in Victoria over a five year period between July 2009 and June 2014.
- Recommendations for policy, practice and areas for further research.

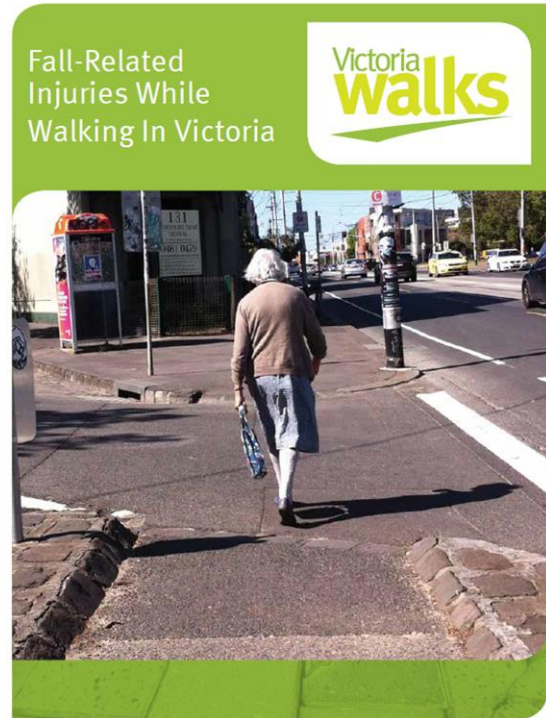
The study found that while collisions with vehicles result in approximately 1,600 pedestrian casualties in Victoria each year, pedestrian falls while walking in the street account for an average of 1,680 hospital admissions and 3,545 ED presentations.

A notable finding is that falls in the street affected all adult age groups. For younger and middle-aged adults, the proportion of ED presentations is relatively consistent with their proportion of the population. However, there is a much higher rate of serious injury for older walkers. Pedestrians aged 75-84 had a hospitalisation rate 9 times greater than those in the 35-64 year age group, and for those aged 85+ the hospitalisation rate was 14 times greater.

Women are particularly affected by falls in the street environment, accounting for 59% of hospitalisations, compared to 41% for men.

The hospital data does not readily allow analysis of the detailed circumstances of falls, but the most commonly reported contributing factors were kerbs or gutters (159 incidents), alcohol or drugs (111), and to a lesser extent uneven surfaces (69), dogs (64), potholes (49), tram or train tracks (39), wet surfaces (33) and wearing high heels (24).

Analysis of Victorian Police data (Crashstats) confirmed that it does not capture fall injuries.



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Media coverage and communications

The research was released in March 2016 and was well covered by media.

The Age ran an excellent story headlined '[Walking into danger: pedestrian falls put 5000 a year in hospital.](#)' This included an interview with an older lady who had fallen in the street (arranged by Victoria Walks with the assistance of COTA). This article was reprinted in some other media including the Ballarat Courier and a separate article was written in one local newspaper.

Victoria Walks' Executive Officer Ben Rossiter was interviewed on prime time 3AW and ABC774 breakfast radio and Dr Oxley was interviewed for the ABC radio news.

A letter to the editor on the research, acknowledging the role of both Victoria Walks and VicHealth, was printed in at least 24 Victorian local newspapers including the Geelong Advertiser, along with two in SA and one in NSW. The letter was printed with an accompanying picture to draw greater prominence in the [Bendigo Advertiser](#), Progress Leader and Maroondah Leader.

The research was also publicised through Victoria Walks communication channels including a website news story, newsletter item, Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn. The research has a permanent [page](#) on the Victoria Walks website.

Influencing practise

This study has provided a valuable starting point that highlights the extent of the problem and the significant limitations associated with traditional crash data sources that are used to investigate injuries in the road environment. The findings provide a basis on which we can better address the risk of falls in public space management and ensure that fall incidents are considered as an important part of the road safety debate.

Efforts by Victoria Walks and MUARC to influence practice in this area will be ongoing and have in many ways only just begun. However initial work in this area has included:

- Dr Oxley presented the research to the Smart Urban Futures conference in Melbourne on 23 March.
- Dr Oxley also presented the research to the [Road Safety on Five Continents \(RS5C\) conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil](#), in May 2016. The conference paper will be printed in the conference proceedings and has been shortlisted for inclusion in a special edition of the prominent international journal *Accident Analysis and Prevention*.
- The research has been and will be incorporated into relevant Victoria Walks presentations, for example the Institute of Transport Engineers [seminar on Age-Friendly Transport](#), June 2016 and the [2WalkandCycle Conference](#) in New Zealand, July 2016.
- The report was graphic designed in June 2016, providing a further opportunity for promotion through Victoria Walks communication channels.
- The report was printed and a hard copy sent to all Victorian councils in June 2016.
- The research has attracted interest amongst the international walking community, including Living Streets in the UK.

Walking is the most important source of exercise for seniors – to maintain and enhance physical activity in the population it is critical to keep people walking well into old age. Given older people's concern with the risk of falling, if these risks are better understood and addressed by road management agencies, this can be expected to encourage physical activity by older people and improve community safety and mobility.



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