



Fund car seats

Free child restraints and education
for families in need.

Road Safety Series
August 2022



Road Safety Series

The NRMA has prepared a series of reports with the aim of identifying the main factors involved in road crashes and initiatives that may help to reduce the risk of loss of life and injuries.

We acknowledge the next major tool to prevent and reduce loss of life will be driven by technology, as was seen with seatbelts. While we move towards an autonomous future, continued investment in road infrastructure, vehicle technology and public education campaigns are needed to improve the safety of motorists on our roads.

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Acknowledging our traditional owners

In the spirit of reconciliation, we acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of Country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community. We pay our respect to Elders past, present and emerging, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

About the NRMA

The NRMA represents over 2.7 million Australians in NSW and the ACT, making it one of the largest tourism and transport companies in Australia. We provide motoring, transport and tourism services to our Members and the community.

We have focused on better transport infrastructure since the beginning, when our founders lobbied for improvements to Sydney's Parramatta Road back in 1920. Independent advocacy is the foundation activity of our organisation, and remains critical to who we are today.



Introduction

Children are one of our most vulnerable road users and they rely on adults to keep them safe while travelling in a car. Unfortunately, road traffic crashes are the leading cause of death for young children.

Tragically, 148 child passengers aged zero to seven lost their lives on Australian roads in the last 10 years.¹ According to a NSW Ombudsman review, children from low socio-economic backgrounds, and, those that live in remote areas and also Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are more likely to lose their lives as a passenger.²

As a community we all have a role to play to ensure that all children stay safe on our roads. Ensuring that they are restrained correctly in a safe and appropriate child restraint is a crucial part of delivering on this outcome.

Programs need to be in place to address the main barriers that families may face in ensuring their children are safely buckled up. Families with low incomes and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families should be given free child restraints coupled with professional installation, and a diversion program should be introduced instead of fining parents who cannot afford restraints. Free child restraint installation through local councils would also go a long way in ensuring car seats are installed and used correctly especially in remote and rural communities.

All families need to be provided with the tools and the confidence to buckle up their precious cargo every time they get in the car. This will go a long way in helping to prevent the loss of life.

What the NRMA wants

- 1.** Government funding for free child car seats and professional installation for low income families and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.
- 2.** Child car seat diversion programs offered to all drivers who receive an initial infringement notice for a child who is not properly restrained.
- 3.** Car seat diversion programs must have long term sustainable funding with additional support programs for people with financial hardship to help access a free child car seat.
- 4.** Child restraint installation should be a mandatory program for every council and include targeted fitting days for disadvantaged community members.
- 5.** Funding through councils to ensure that all residents with children can access free child car restraint checks or installations, including a dedicated service for disadvantaged community members.
- 6.** Better education for buyers and sellers on safe and compliant second-hand restraints that can be bought, sold or handed down.

Keep our precious cargo safe

Across Australia,

148

child passengers (0-7 years) were killed in car crashes in the last ten years.¹

In NSW,

31

child passengers (0-7 years) were killed in car crashes in last 10 years.¹

From 2016-2020, nearly

450

children aged between 0 to 4 years old were killed or injured as passengers.³

The mortality rate was

5

times as high for children in the most disadvantaged areas compared to those in the least disadvantaged areas.²

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child passengers died at

4

times the rate of others.²

Four out of every five

child passengers died in crashes outside major cities.²



NSW penalty for unrestrained children

3 demerit

points and

\$352 fine

National child restraint laws

By law, all children under the age of seven must be restrained by a child restraint for their age and size.



Up to 6 months
Approved rear facing child car seat.



6 months to 4 years
Approved rear or forward facing child car seat.



4+ years
Approved forward facing child car seat or booster seat.



145cm or taller
Suggested minimum height to use adult lap-sash seatbelt.

(Source: childcarseats.com.au)

Fine data obtained from Revenue NSW from 1 July 2021 – 31 June 2022 revealed:

1,877

NSW drivers were fined for not having a child properly restrained.

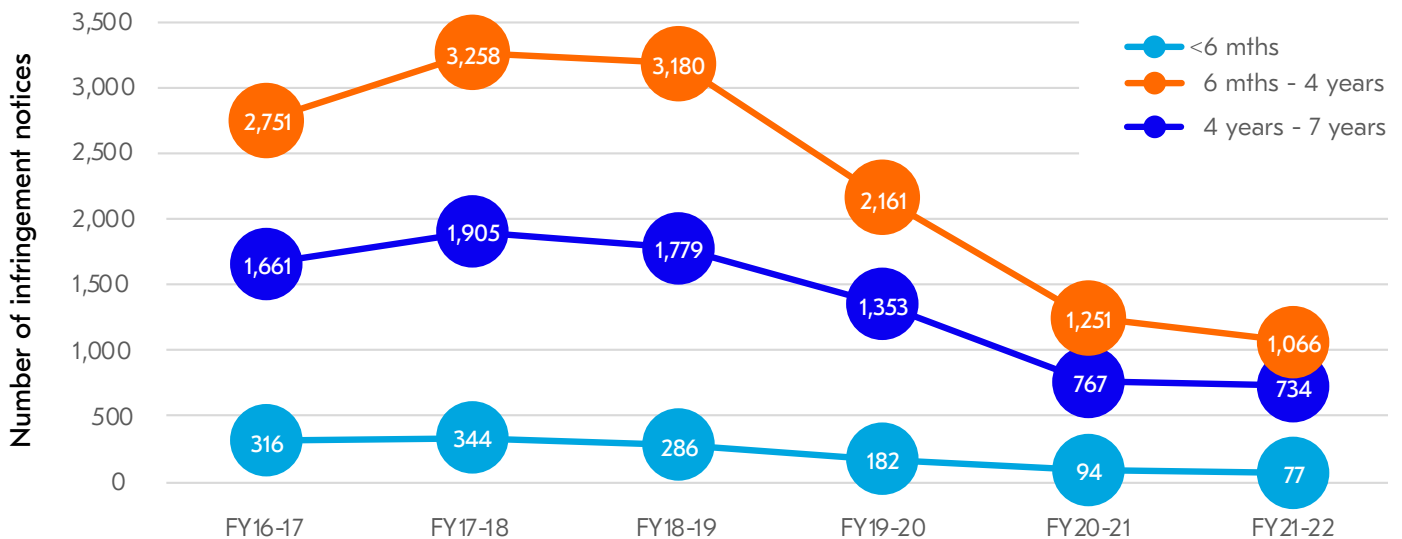


Table 1. Number of infringement notices for unrestrained children by age issued in NSW.

(Source: Revenue NSW).

Every child deserves to be buckled up

Road traffic crashes are the leading cause of death in Australian children aged one to 14 years.⁴ With over two million children aged zero and seven across Australia, every single one of these children deserves to be safely restrained in a car.⁵

When it comes to buckling up children, not just any seat belt will do. Across Australia there are mandatory laws that require children under the age of seven to be buckled up in the right restraint for their age and size. Children who are correctly restrained are better protected against fatal or serious injuries compared to non-restrained children. Yet, tragically 148 children (0-7 years) lost their lives as passengers on Australian roads in the last 10 years.⁶

The NSW Ombudsman commissioned a review of the deaths of 66 children who died as passengers on NSW roads between 2007 and 2016. The review found that almost a third of children under 13 would have probably been saved if they were properly restrained.² Alarming, 35 of the 66 children were not properly restrained.

They have identified that children from low socio-economic backgrounds, those that live in remote areas and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are as more likely to lose their lives as a passenger. The review found that most children who died lived in the lowest socio-economic areas of NSW. The mortality rate was five times as high for children from the most disadvantaged areas compared to those from areas of least disadvantage. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children died at four times the rate of others, while four out of every five children died in crashes outside major cities.

Clearly more needs to be done to ensure that all children are correctly restrained when travelling in a vehicle, and any barriers that people face must be addressed.



Fund car seats to save kids' lives

A child car seat is one big ticket item that parents have to purchase when they are having a baby. Families typically need two child restraints per child per vehicle to cover them from birth to seven years of age and beyond. Prices vary considerably, with child restraints ranging from \$50 to almost \$800, which can be cost prohibitive for families in need.

Families with more than one child may be under pressure to graduate children early out of the right sized restraint and often into an adult seat belt, to make way for the next child to use the restraint. This is a potentially dangerous decision that parents who are cash strapped may have to make.

Several jurisdictions across the USA offer free child car seats to low income families to help ensure the safety of children travelling in cars.

In Ohio, the *Ohio Buckles Buckeyes* program provides eligible low income families with a free child car seat. Participants must also attend an educational course on how to correctly install and use the restraint. The program has been running for over five years and has provided 17,000 child restraints to low income families.⁷ The program is funded by child restraint fines hypothecated into a Child Highway Safety Fund and other government funding sources.

In Australia, very few local programs exist that help provide free child restraints to families in need. They range from one-off grants to informal partnerships between government agencies and community groups.

Since 2016, NSW Police have run a program for Aboriginal families, whereby families in need are provided with a compliant child restraint and installation. The program covers Western Sydney, Dubbo, Wagga Wagga, Nowra and Broken Hill regions, where local Aboriginal Medical Services helps to identify new mothers who may otherwise not be able to afford a child restraint.

NSW Police also partnered with Kidsafe NSW to include accredited child restraint fitting with the child seats. This training is delivered to local police, Aboriginal Community Liaison Officers, Aboriginal Medical Services, social workers, transport workers and in some smaller communities, new mothers.

To date, more than 800 child restraints have been distributed to those in need and the only accredited child restraint fitters west of Dubbo are people trained through this program.⁸ The program is predominately funded by Transport for NSW's Aboriginal Program as well as corporate sponsors and the Aboriginal Coordination Team.

Across Australia, a coordinated and sustainable approach is needed to increase the availability of child car seats to those who cannot afford them and increase the correct installation and proper use of restraints.

According to 2016 Census, the most currently available data, there were 625,065 households in NSW with at least one motor vehicle, with a household income of up to \$51,999.⁹ As of 2016, the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research estimates that the poverty line for a household with two adults and two dependent children is \$967.23 per week (\$50,296 per annum).¹⁰

The NRMA believes that a free child restraint, professional installation and education should be introduced for low income families and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families with children aged zero to seven years. The program needs to be adequately promoted through existing services and considerable effort must be made to identify families in need, especially in rural and remote areas. The program could also be promoted and scaled up during natural disasters such as bushfires and floods to ensure displaced families have child restraints to transport children.

Consideration should also be given to implementation strategies for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia that may require a more tailored approach.

NSW Police and Westmead Dragonfly Midwifery

Westmead Hospital's Dragonfly Midwifery Caseload is one of the locations where NSW runs its Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child car seat program.

New mothers who cannot afford a compliant child car seat are identified by Westmead Dragonfly Midwifery Caseload. These families are supplied with a free convertible child restraint (0-4 years) and are provided with education and training by NSW Police on how to correctly install and adjust the car seat.

This targeted program helps to ensure that all newborn babies born through the Dragonfly Caseload Clinic have the opportunity to be safely secured in a correctly installed child restraint. Their parents also gain knowledge on how to correctly adjust and use the restraint as the child grows and continues to use the seat until they are four years old.



Julie Swain, Director of Nursing and Midwifery, Women's and Newborn Health, Westmead Hospital and Inspector Greg Donaldson, Macarthur Highway Patrol.
(Credit: Westmead Dragonfly Midwifery Caseload).

Second-hand restraints

Many parents seek out second-hand baby equipment to help alleviate costs. Child car seats are cost prohibitive for some families, especially in disadvantaged communities.

RACV investigated the second-hand child restraint market and found just over one in five second-hand child restraints sold online or in store were not suitable for sale because they were damaged, too old, or an illegal overseas model.¹¹

More work needs to be done to educate retailers on safe and compliant restraints that can be sold second-hand. Parents also need to be educated on what to look for when deciding to purchase or use a second-hand restraint. Disadvantaged communities may require a more targeted education approach to ensure barriers to receiving this information are addressed.

Tips for buying second-hand:

- Check it has an Australian Standard AS/NZS 1754 sticker.
- Make sure the restraint is not older than 10 years by checking the year of manufacture sticker.
- Inspect for wear and tear, frayed straps, and ensure the buckle clicks into place securely.
- Ask if the restraint has ever been in a crash as damage may not be obvious; if it has – do not use it.
- Do not use an overseas child car seat as it is illegal to do so in Australia.



Find kids that fall through the cracks

Across Australia, police enforce the national child restraint laws to ensure that children are restrained properly. Often enforcement of child restraints laws is incidental rather than targeted. For example, when a driver is pulled over for a Random Breath Test, police may notice a child that is inadequately restrained and issue an infringement notice.

During 2021/2022, over 1,800 drivers were fined for not having a child properly restrained in NSW.¹² The penalty for not having a child properly restrained is a \$352 fine and three demerit points. This may be an under representation of the issue due to COVID restrictions and method of enforcement practices.

Issuing fines to those who are disadvantaged will not solve the road safety problem of unrestrained children. In particular, for disadvantaged communities, the accumulation of infringement notices can have a detrimental effect and can often lead to the loss of a licence.

Diversion programs that identify people who are incorrectly or not restraining their children and educate them on how to keep their children safe is a better approach rather than handing out fines. Assistance for families with financial difficulties to source a compliant child car seat is also critical.

Child car seat diversion programs operate in some jurisdictions in the USA, and a pilot program is currently operating in NSW.

NSW car seat diversion program

In NSW, a car seat diversion program is currently being piloted by NSW Police and Revenue NSW in the Macarthur, Bankstown, Wagga Wagga and Dubbo Local Government Areas. Almost 60 people have taken up the diversion program and had a child car seat correctly installed since the program commenced in June 2021.¹³

The program involves NSW Police providing drivers who are caught with an unrestrained child a diversion option to have a child car seat professionally installed in lieu of a being issued a fine. Drivers are required to book an appointment with an accredited installer within seven days and they have 21 days to have the car seat fitted to avoid a fine. Further roll-out of the diversion program is being potentially considered pending a formal review.

The NRMA believes that state-wide car seat diversion programs should be in place across Australia for first time offenders. Car seat diversion programs should also be offered to all drivers who receive an initial infringement notice for a child who is not properly restrained rather than at the sole discretion of a police officer.

Car seat diversion programs must also have long term sustainable funding with additional support programs for people with financial hardship to access a free and compliant child car seat.

Help families correctly fit car seats

Getting a car seat professionally installed is recommended as it ensures that the restraint is correctly fitted to the vehicle and properly adjusted for the child's size. Parents can also be shown how to install a car seat if it needs to be moved to another vehicle. However, having a child restraint fitted by a trained professional can be cost prohibitive for disadvantaged communities.

Child restraint fitting stations charge a fee to install or inspect and adjust a car seat based on labour costs and parts. Costs vary, and parents can expect to pay \$40 to \$80 per installation.

"It is important that car seats are installed professionally and parents are shown how to install the seats themselves".

To protect a child in a crash, the restraint must be:

- the right size
- correctly fitted to the vehicle
- properly adjusted and fastened.

Free child car seat checks

Some local councils across NSW offer free child restraint fitting and inspection checks that are organised by Road Safety Officers. Unfortunately, not every local government area has access to a Road Safety Officer, especially remote areas of NSW.

Free child seat checks vary across councils. Some councils have designated child restraint fitting days in the local area. Other councils ask residents to apply for a voucher to have their car seat fitted by a mobile authorised restraint fitter at their home. The voucher system tends to cost more to operate given that it's a mobile service and therefore potentially reduces the reach of the program.

Council run child restraint fitting days and vouchers are often oversubscribed and very few councils offer additional free restraint fitting services targeted specifically for disadvantaged communities.

Having dedicated days for disadvantaged community members will help address barriers that prevent people from attending mainstream fitting days. These barriers may include: being ashamed of driving an old or dirty vehicle; worried they will get into trouble if their vehicle is not in a good condition or not roadworthy; not having a clean or compliant child car seat or having an old seat. A targeted and localised approach is needed to help reach these community members.

Local governments have extensive knowledge of local issues and established relationships with local groups such as community centres, local health services and pre/postnatal clinics. They are best placed to understand and meet the needs of their community, especially disadvantaged members.

As part of the 2026 Road Safety Action Plan, the Local Government Road Safety Program will be reviewed and expanded to ensure every council has access to a Road Safety Officer.¹⁴ The NRMA believes that this review should also ensure that child restraint installation is a mandatory program for every council, and includes targeted fitting days for disadvantaged community members.

Funding should ensure that all residents with children can access a free child car restraint check or installation including disadvantaged community members. The service must also be adequately promoted through targeted education campaigns.

Campbelltown City Council

Campbelltown City Council is home to more than 170,000 people. It has a young population with an average age of 36 years. The local government area covers a 312km² and includes a mix of metropolitan and regional.¹⁵

Campbelltown City Council runs bi-monthly free child restraint installation or safety checks as well as a dedicated fitting day for disadvantaged communities. The council partners with NSW Police and government agencies to provide this targeted service and to help families who do not have access to a compliant child car seat.

Virtual restraint checks

In rural and remote areas of Australia where there are very few or no accredited child restraint fitters, virtual restraint checks may be part of the solution in keeping kids safe.

The Royal Automobile Association of South Australia's (RAA) Child Road Safety Centre launched a virtual child restraint checking service during the COVID pandemic when it was forced to cease in person installations due to restrictions.

The service allows families to book a video conference session on a variety of platforms and receive a virtual demonstration on how to correctly fit a car seat and be talked through the installation process. The virtual service is still available as an option for people who cannot attend in person.

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