

False sense of safety fuels risky driving among youths

► Experts urge mix of education, enforcement and psychology to reverse troubling crash trends in Malaysia

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PETALING JAYA: Malaysian youths' risky driving habits stem from a false sense of invincibility and peer pressure, experts warn, and call for urgent multi-pronged action to address the worsening road safety crisis.

Universiti Putra Malaysia's head of the Putra Injury Prevention and Safety Promotion unit, Prof Dr Kulanthayan KC Mani, said many young drivers believe they are immune to harm and assume road safety messages do not apply to them.

"They often think accidents happen to others, not themselves. Without experiencing a serious crash or injury, many don't feel the need to change their behaviour. That's the real challenge."

While this mindset is often linked to youths, Kulanthayan observed it is widespread among road users and only shifts after traumatic incidents.

"Young people tend to be overconfident and drawn to thrills. Peer influence plays a huge role. Even those who wouldn't usually take risks may feel pressured to drive dangerously just to fit in or appear 'cool.'"

These concerns follow troubling figures.

According to 2023 data from the Bukit Aman Traffic Investigation and Enforcement Department, there were 598,635 road crashes nationwide, including 28,511 minor collisions.

Kulanthayan emphasised that education alone is not enough.

"Education delivers long-term change, but enforcement brings immediate – though often short-lived – results. What we need is a mix

of education, consistent enforcement and engineering solutions such as safer road designs and clearer signage."

He acknowledged government efforts to introduce road safety education from preschool to Form 4 but warned that successful implementation is crucial.

"If the programme is only partially delivered, we won't see the full benefits. Like medicine, the dosage matters."

Head of the university's Road Safety Research Centre Assoc Prof Dr Law Teik Hua said current driver training focuses too heavily on technical skills and not enough on shaping proper attitudes and risk awareness.

"Young drivers often hit the road feeling untouchable, without fully grasping the real-world dangers

behind the wheel."

Law added that some road designs can inadvertently encourage reckless behaviour.

"Wide, straight roads with minimal enforcement create conditions that promote speeding. Urban planning must consider how road layouts affect driver behaviour."

To reduce youth-related crashes, he suggested Malaysia adopt proven international models such as the graduated licensing systems used in Sweden and Australia.

"These systems combine phased licensing with programmes that expose young drivers to the real consequences of crashes. It helps curb overconfidence and risk-taking."

Adding a psychological perspective, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia's senior psychology officer Dr Zulfikar Ahmad said adolescents are naturally inclined towards risk.

"Youngsters crave intense, novel experiences. They may know the risks, but the thrill often outweighs caution."

He explained this stems from brain development.

"The prefrontal cortex – which controls decision-making and impulse regulation – doesn't fully mature until the mid-20s, while the limbic system, which processes emotion and reward, is highly active."

Social influences also fuel risky behaviour.

"Peer pressure and social media have major impacts. In subcultures like *mat rempit*, dangerous stunts are status symbols. Even when aware of the risks, many youths downplay or ignore them in pursuit of short-term approval."

To address this, Zulfikar called for early and sustained psychological and educational intervention.

"Road safety education should begin in kindergarten and continue throughout school years. It's vital to also engage young people through social media and digital platforms, where they spend most of their time."

He stressed the need for continuous psychoeducation across all age groups, using every digital tool available to deliver road safety messages that resonate.



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