

Opinion

A super-aged Singapore needs traffic regulations for more than bad drivers

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In Singapore, stricter rules and tougher traffic penalties have been proposed for good reason. Between 2021 and 2025, the road traffic fatality rate rose by 24 per cent and traffic violations by 38 per cent.

On July 31, the police announced a tightening of the demerit points system to keep irresponsible motorists off the roads for longer. From January 2027, drivers will face suspension at 18 demerit points instead of 24. Probationary motorists will have their licences revoked at 12 points instead of 13.

Separately, the Road Traffic (Miscellaneous Amendments) Bill will introduce stiffer penalties for the most serious conduct, lower drink-driving limits and a clearer offence for holding a mobile phone while a vehicle is moving.

Every one of these measures is aimed at the driver who knew better and chose otherwise. However, that driver is no longer the whole story of road safety in Singapore.

Two other changes are gathering pace. Singapore is ageing, and its transport system will continue to be automated. Together, they make the familiar question of whether a driver behaved badly less sufficient than it used to be.

The road ahead requires us to keep three ideas separate. The law must deter deliberate risk, keep people safely mobile as their capabilities change and, when a machine or control room takes over some or all of the driving, make responsibility follow the task.

Penalties are for choices

Some road risks are plainly choices. A person who drinks and drives has decided to impose a danger on strangers. So has the driver who reaches for a phone while the vehicle is moving. People take more care when the rule is clear, detection is credible and the consequence is real.

The proposed mobile-phone change shows how. Today, an officer must prove that a driver was using the device. Under the Bill, simply holding it while the vehicle is moving would be enough.

This is where stronger penalties are most pertinent. The driver had control, understood the danger and made a choice. The law should make that choice costly before it harms someone else.

Growing old is not an offence

Consider older residents who decide they should no longer drive. That may be the prudent choice, but it should not mean giving up visits to a grandchild's home, a medical appointment or grocery shopping. These trips are what allows a person to stay connected to loved ones, care and everyday life.

Singapore's citizens aged 65 and above made up 20.7 per cent of the citizen population in 2025. By 2030, the share is expected to be close to one in four. This will change who is on the road and what they need from it.

It is too easy to frame this as a problem of dangerous older drivers. The latest traffic figures point to another, more troubling, reality. Older people made up 12.9 per cent of the overall population in 2025, but accounted for three in four pedestrian deaths. Fatal accidents involving elderly pedestrians rose from 11 in 2024 to 27 in 2025, against an average of 18 a year between 2021 and 2023.

That does not tell us why every accident happened, nor is it reason to lump all older people together. It does tell us that road risk is not evenly distributed, but increasingly borne by those least able to absorb it, often as pedestrians rather than drivers. A slower reaction time, if it comes, is not a wilful act. There is little for a harsher penalty to deter.

Singapore already knows what the right response looks like. In Silver Zones, roads are narrowed, speed limits lowered and crossing times extended. The added deterrents fall on drivers, who face extra demerit points and higher fines. Accidents involving senior pedestrians have fallen by about 80 per cent in completed zones. Green Man+ now buys older pedestrians a few extra seconds at more than 1,000 crossings.

Licensing already follows the same logic. Drivers aged 65 and above must pass a medical review to keep their licence. The test is one of capability, not age. For the people who fail it, or decide on their own that it is time to stop, the value of a safe trip is not just

the fare or the journey time, but also the ability to continue running one's own life.

A driverless ride is not a humanless system

This is where automation comes in. For the residents who have given up their licence, automated shuttles could restore the trips they surrendered. Whether these do so depends less on the technology than on a question the word "driverless" hides: Who, exactly, is doing the driving? That question can sound like a technical dispute, but the answer will decide whether an ageing Singapore actually keeps moving.

Singapore is investing \$800 million in transport research and innovation over the next five years, with much of the programme directed at autonomy. In Punggol, residents can already ride trial autonomous shuttles along fixed loops on public roads. On July 29, Grab announced an on-demand pilot that will let residents book a vehicle to travel directly to clinics, markets and the Punggol Coast MRT station, with public rides expected by the end of 2026.

Driving, however, is not one task. It is a bundle that includes sensing the road, steering, deciding when to stop, handling the unexpected and taking over when something goes wrong. A modern automated vehicle can sense its surroundings through cameras, radar and lidar, but seeing is the easier half of driving. The harder half is judgment, and whether that job stays with the service behind the ride or lands on our older residents depends on the kind of automation.

In a fully automated shuttle, they are passengers in the way they are when in a lift or on the MRT, where nobody expects them to seize the controls if something fails. That kind of automation genuinely returns their independence.

In a partially automated car that steers itself but expects them to watch the road and take over without warning, they have not stopped being drivers. They have been handed the hardest job in the vehicle. It demands constant vigilance and split-second intervention, the very capabilities that age erodes first.

Either way, the driving task never disappears. In one vehicle it stays with them; in the other, it moves out of their sight. That is why accountability is an ageing issue. Automation widens mobility only if the driving task genuinely moves away from the person it was supposed to relieve, and if it is clear who holds it instead.

It is also a matter of trust. In 2021, the Lloyd's Register Foundation World Risk Poll found that roughly two in three people worldwide would not feel safe riding in a car without a human driver; in no country did a majority say they would.

Yet in Punggol, 99 per cent of the trial's first riders said they would recommend the shuttles. That trust was earned while a safety operator still sat in the vehicle. Keeping it when the seat is empty will require honesty about what the system can and cannot do, and passengers who always know their role.

Singapore is already moving in this direction. A public consultation on the legislative framework for autonomous vehicles (AV), which closed at the end of June, names four parties who may hold parts of the driving task: the entities behind the AV technology, fleet operators, on-board safety operators and remote operators.

The new Punggol services show what this means in practice. Grab's on-demand pilot will be supported by safety operators on board and a team of remote operators in a command centre. One day, that safety operator's seat will be empty; most of the driving will sit with the vehicle's system, with remote staff monitoring the fleet and stepping in only when needed.

Sensors and software cannot answer for a mistake, and someone watching a fleet is not driving any one vehicle. Responsibility must therefore rest with the organisations that build the system and decide when and how their staff intervene. How clearly these pilots assign and communicate those duties deserves as much attention as how smoothly the vehicles drive.

This is not a call for a blame game after every incident, but for duties assigned before one occurs and stated plainly in public. Handover rules should be simple enough for a real person to follow. Companies should be clear about what their on-board and remote staff can actually see and do. No vehicle should be sold as more automated than it is. From January 2027, marketing a car in Britain as "self-driving" when it is not will be a criminal offence.

Singapore is right to take dangerous driving more seriously. In an ageing, automated city, however, road safety will ask more of the law than tougher punishment. It will require clear consequences for deliberate risk, safe alternatives for people whose mobility is changing, and an honest account of who controls the system when driving becomes a shared task.

That is how rules become not only stricter, but also fairer and easier for the public to follow.

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