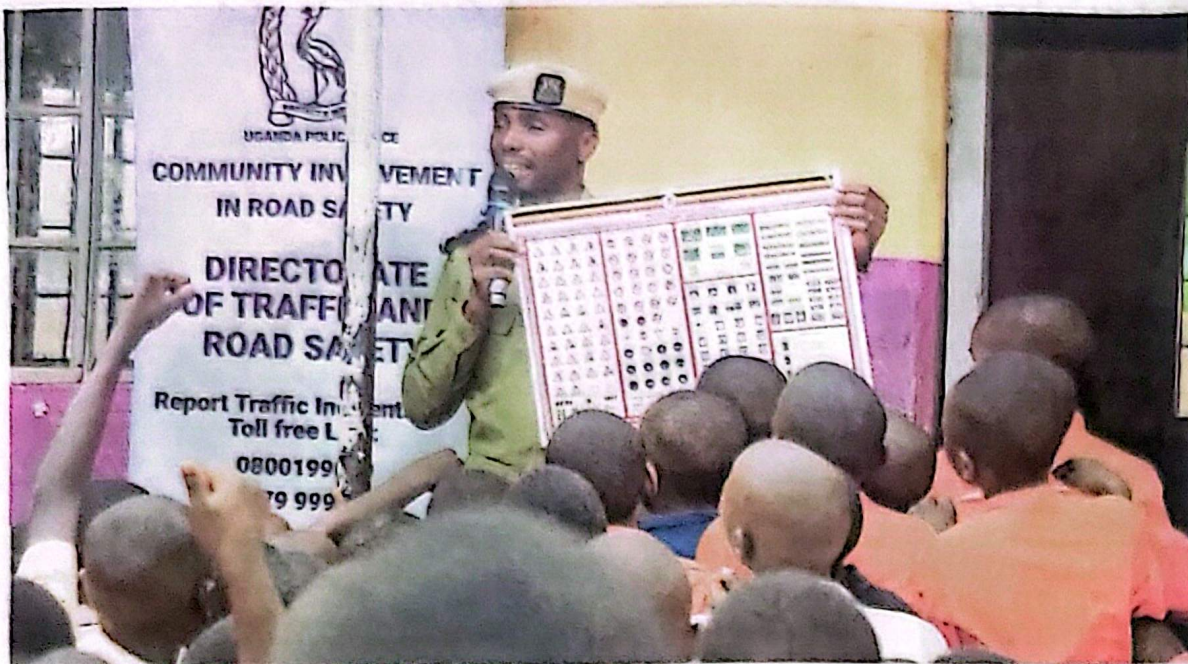




Traffic Police spokesperson Michael Kananura teaches pupils some traffic signs during a police sensitisation programme in selected primary schools in Uganda. PHOTOS/GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

When road rules are ignored, lives are lost

Road traffic deaths in Uganda continue to rise despite increased enforcement and awareness campaigns. Experts, police, and survivors say the problem is not lack of knowledge, but widespread disregard for traffic rules, risky driving behaviour, and poor discipline on the roads.

BY GEOFFREY OYET OKWERA

What began as a routine journey from Lyantonde to Kampala nearly turned into a fatal headline for Steve Mujuni.

He remembers the road behaving as it always does on a good day: steady flow, predictable traffic, and the long hum of engines stretching across the highway. His Subaru Legacy sat comfortably at about 120 km/h, the kind of speed familiar to many drivers on that stretch.

Then, without warning, the rhythm broke. A truck from the opposite direction drifted into his lane.

At first, Mujuni thought it was a minor wobble, something the driver would correct. But the movement became deliberate, and then dangerous. The truck was now fully encroaching, closing the distance fast.

"There was no time to think," he says. "It was just a reaction."

In that split second, he swerved sharply into the opposite lane, gambling on the hope that it was clear. It was. The truck roared past where he

He survived. But the silence that followed felt heavier than the near collision itself.

A highway shared with danger

Mujuni's experience is not an exception on Uganda's highways; it is a pattern.

Across major routes linking Kampala to the rest of the country, drivers describe a growing normalisation of risk: impatient overtaking, fatigue on long-distance routes, overloaded trucks, and drivers who treat lane discipline as optional.

Between January and February alone, 36 people were killed in road crashes nationwide, according to traffic records, an early-year reminder of a problem that rarely slows down.

And yet, officials say the causes are no mystery. They are repeated behaviours.

The training gap

For road safety specialist Stephen Damulira, Uganda's crash problem begins long before a vehicle hits the road.

"It starts with how people are trained," he says.

WHAT THE NUMBERS REVEAL BEYOND UGANDA'S ROADS

Police and road safety reports indicate that a significant number of fatal crashes occur during daytime hours, particularly when traffic is heavy and drivers are more likely to take risks such as speeding and unsafe overtaking. This challenges the assumption that road danger is mainly a night-time issue.

Recent trends also show a worrying disconnect between enforcement and outcomes. Even as traffic offences have declined in some reporting periods, road crashes and fatalities have continued to rise, suggesting that compliance alone is not translating into safer driving behaviour.

Young men remain one of the most affected groups in road traffic incidents, reflecting a combination of inexperience, risk-taking behaviour, and exposure to high-mobility transport roles such as commercial driving and boda boda riding.

At the same time, vulnerable road users, particularly pedestrians, cyclists, and motorcyclists, continue to bear the greatest burden of road deaths, especially in urban and peri-urban areas where traffic is dense and mixed.

He argues that the process of obtaining a driving permit still allows too many unprepared drivers onto the road, people who understand how to operate a vehicle, but not how to survive traffic.

Defensive driving, hazard anticipation, and emergency decision-making, he says, are often treated as extras rather than essentials.

A properly trained driver, Damulira explains, does not simply react to danger; they predict it. And on Uganda's highways, prediction is often the difference between life and death.

'People know the rules, they just ignore them'

If training is one side of the problem, behaviour is the other. Retired traffic officer Ziraba Katende has spent years on Uganda's roads, watching patterns repeat themselves.

He does not speak about ignorance. He speaks about choice.

"Most drivers know the rules," he says. "The problem is they decide when to follow them."

Speeding, dangerous overtaking, drunk driving, and ignoring road signs remain common even in areas where enforcement presence is visible.

Katende leans on a simple argument: awareness campaigns have done their job. What is missing is discipline.

He pauses before adding a point that many road safety experts echo in different words. "Road safety is personal responsibility."

A continent-wide crisis

Uganda's struggle sits inside a much larger African crisis.

According to the Africa Status Report on Road Safety, about 650 people die daily from road traffic crashes across the continent. Nearly half of these are pedestrians, cyclists, and motorcyclists, the most exposed road users.

The economic impact is equally severe, with losses estimated at up to three percent of GDP in many African countries. The report also shows that Africa's road fatality rate is nearly three times higher than that of high-income countries.

In Uganda, the trend is not improving. Traffic Police data shows road deaths rising from 5,144 in 2014 to 5,383 in 2015; about 15 deaths every day.

Behind each number is a journey that did not end as planned.

Inside the enforcement push

At the centre of Uganda's response is a more visible and aggressive enforcement strategy. The Traffic Police have rolled out the second phase of the 'Arrive Alive' campaign, a mix of checkpoints, roadside inspections, and intensified patrols along major highways.

Traffic Police spokesperson SP Michael Kananura describes it as a shift from awareness to accountability.

At roadside stops, vehicles are checked for roadworthiness, including tyre condition, lighting systems, and mechanical safety. Those found with defects are taken off the road until corrections are made.

Motorists using unauthorised flashing or swivelling lights are also stopped and required to remove them before proceeding.

On major highways, checkpoints have become more frequent, especially in known crash hotspots, supported by round-the-clock patrols.

The goal, Kananura says, is not just presence, but pressure.

"This will help make non-compliance feel risky enough that people change behaviour," he explains.

The schoolroom strategy

But enforcement is only one part of the plan. In a longer-term approach, the police have taken road safety into classrooms.

Primary school pupils are being taught how to read road signs, cross safely, and understand basic traffic behaviour.

It is a strategy built on repetition: the idea that habits formed early are harder to unlearn later.

"These children will grow into drivers, passengers, and parents," Kananura says. "What they learn now stays with them."

The system behind the wheel

Beyond behaviour and enforcement lies another layer: systems.

The Traffic Police have tightened oversight of driving tests, licensing, and vehicle inspections. Officers are required to verify permits and assess competence, particularly for commercial drivers and boda boda riders.

For boda boda riders, one of the most vulnerable groups on the road, training is being prioritised due to their exposure to high-risk environments.

Yet even with stricter checks, officials admit that enforcement alone cannot fix structural gaps in transport discipline.

Where the road still leads

Back on the highway, Mujuni's near miss fades into memory, but not meaning. He describes a feeling many drivers do not speak about openly: the awareness that survival on the road often depends on the actions of strangers.

"You can do everything right," he says, "and still find yourself in danger."

That tension sits at the heart of Uganda's road safety crisis. Rules exist. Campaigns exist. Enforcement exists.

But on the ground, the outcome is still shaped by split-second decisions, human, unpredictable, and often unforgiving.

Until that changes, the road will remain what it has become for many: not just a route between destinations, but a place where ordinary journeys still carry extraordinary risk.