

ACRS Submission on the Impact of Road Safety Behaviours on Vulnerable Road Users



To:

Parliament of Victoria
Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee
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Introduction

The Australasian College of Road Safety is the region's peak membership association for road safety with a vision of eliminating death and serious injury on the road. Our members include experts from all areas of road safety including policy makers, health and transport professionals, academics, community organisations, researchers, federal, state, and local government agencies, private companies, and members of the public. The purpose of the ACRS is to support our members in their efforts to eliminate serious road trauma through knowledge sharing, professional development, networking, and advocacy. Our objectives include the promotion of road safety as a critical organisational objective within government, business, and the community; the promotion and advocacy of policies and practices that support harm elimination; the improvement of relative safety outcomes for vulnerable demographic and user groups within the community; the promotion of post-crash policies and practices; and the promotion of a collegiate climate amongst all those with responsibilities for and working in road safety.

The ACRS believes that we should prevent all fatal and serious injuries on our roads; the road traffic system must be made safe for all road users; system designers should aim to prevent human error and mitigate its consequences; life and health are not exchangeable for other benefits in society; and that all ACRS policy positions must be evidence based.

ACRS response to the Terms of Reference

a) What changes in road safety behaviours have been observed from 2020 onwards

While reductions in road trauma during COVID-19 were seen in many countries around the world, it was not universal, with some increases particularly in fatalities being recorded, and attributed to an increase in speeding, emptier traffic lanes, reduced law enforcement, not wearing seat belts, and alcohol or other drug use.(1) Changes were found globally in the reason for travel, method of transportation, distance travelled, and number of trips – fewer people travelled for work and school, public transport use decreased, and personal vehicle use including cycling and walking increased.(2) It was found in Australia that, although there was a reduction overall in the number of fatal and serious injuries from road crashes, the decrease was not commensurate with the reduction in the number of kilometres travelled. In Victoria, the decrease in kilometres travelled was 14% larger than the decrease in road trauma.

In the USA, there was a reported 14% increase in fatality rates in March 2020. Examining the statistic of miles driven, there was a drop of 8.6% compared to the same time period in 2019, while the mileage fatality rate per 100 million miles driven was 1.22 in March 2020, compared to 1.07 in the previous year.(3)

Some of these changes have remained post the COVID-19 lockdowns. Public transport patronage has not returned to pre-COVID-19 levels, with weekday public transport in Victoria sitting at around 80-85% of pre-COVID-19 levels as of early 2023.(4) Health and environmental considerations, along with changed travel choices and behaviours during COVID-19, have seen lasting increases in active travel participation. This has been encouraged by many Councils with policies and programs to encourage and support active travel in communities. While there are many benefits to this, increases in safe cycling infrastructure have not necessarily also remained.

Increasing volumes of cyclists and e-scooters means that there are increasing cyclist numbers on shared paths which are often insufficient, increasing exposure risks for pedestrians. This also highlights the need to ensure that crossings are well designed and user-friendly, including pedestrian-only crossing facilities in high volume areas, cyclist crossing facilities, and shared path crossing facilities where appropriate.

Other trends and issues that began pre-COVID-19 are also affecting road safety. Sales of larger vehicles such as SUVs in Australia have continued to increase since COVID-19, with passenger vehicles now making up only 19% of new vehicle sales in Australia in 2022 (down from 30% in 2019), and SUVs and light commercial vehicles such as utes, making up the majority of the remainder.(5) These larger vehicles are over-represented in pedestrian and cyclist fatalities, with children up to eight times more likely to die if hit by an SUV than by a passenger vehicle.(6) The use of telematics, dash cams, and trackers for work vehicles has been increasing for several years.

An Infrastructure Victoria report from 2021 on the increase in working from home predicted that – people might move a little further away from work; jobs could further concentrate in inner Melbourne; and road congestion would continue with longer car trips on average. The report recommended congestion pricing in inner Melbourne, and phasing out fixed road user charges in favour of user pays; discounted off-peak public transport fares and increased off-peak service frequencies; and extending and upgrading rail services in several areas.(7)

Another change is the increase in use of bicycles and motorcycles for food delivery. Before the pandemic, an estimated 250,000 Australians were gig workers in transport and food delivery.(8) Since then, the number of Australians using meal delivery services has doubled(9) and the revenue of food delivery companies has increased by more than 20% per year.(10)

Some changes have been observed for which the ACRS does not have supporting evidence to confirm. For example, an observed increase in road works and infrastructure building leading to increased numbers of trucks and large vehicles – and traffic volumes as people choose to drive rather than use public transport – and an observed decrease in visible policing other than for speed detection. For example, the number of random breath tests conducted in Australia dropped from 15 million in 2019 to 7 million in 2020 according to the BITRE Road Safety Dashboard.(11) There are reports of increases in mental health issues and financial stress, impatient and aggressive driving and ‘road rage’ incidents, distraction and mobile phone use while driving, increased risk-taking, and fatigue both during and after the pandemic.(12) This may be related to having experienced the quieter streets and lack of traffic during COVID-19, so that the return to more usual levels of traffic brings new levels of frustration and anxiety.

During COVID-19 there were reports of increased usage of motorbikes, caravans, and recreational travel, with many people inexperienced in these vehicles or not having operated them for many years returning to those modes of transport.

Continued moves away from traditional media and towards social media feeds of which people can opt in or out, and the dominance of on-demand and streaming services is presenting increasing challenges for public messaging. This makes it difficult to deliver key messages and road safety programs and initiatives, at the same time as an increase in risky road user behaviours is being observed. Connecting with communities around road safety messaging is essential to successfully educate the community around issues such as why some speed limits need to be lowered.

The weather patterns and disasters during 2022 have led to a backlog of maintenance required to keep roads in a usable condition. This will continue to be a problem into the future and must be considered in the design, construction, and function of roads.(13)

b) If changes have been observed, what is shaping these changes

As noted above, the decrease in kilometres travelled during COVID-19 was 14% larger than the decrease in road trauma. Possible reasons for this are greater inattention/distraction; increase in the use of the vehicle as a workplace; increase in vulnerable road users and proportionately more risk-takers on the road, and possibly increased suicides on the road.(14) In Australia it is estimated that up to 7% of motor vehicle fatalities may be caused by intentional actions to take one's own life.(15)

Factors such as the increased stress and anxiety brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, more "free" (idle) time, increased consumption of alcohol and drugs, and greater opportunities for speeding and stunt driving, may lead to a higher risk of collisions.(12) In Australia, retail alcohol sales increased by 29% from 2019 to 2021, and in Victoria the increase was 37%.(16) We also experienced lower levels of wellbeing, higher levels of psychological distress, long periods of loneliness and social isolation, fewer hours of work and a drop in income during COVID-19, and some young people working more than one job to survive financially, with Victorians impacted the most.(17) Victoria Police reported increases in family violence incidents during COVID-19, including for people reporting for the first time, and new forms of violence.(18)

c) How these changes have impacted vulnerable road users, including pedestrians, cyclists, motorcycle riders, children, older people and mobility device users

The COVID-19-related changes have had a range of different effects, even for the same groups. Some of these changes may have mitigated or enhanced the effects of others, so the overall effects are hard to measure. For example, the expansion of facilities for cycling and walking during COVID-19 would have contributed to improving the safety of operating conditions for these road users, but some of these improvements are likely to have been offset by increases in risky driving behaviours by motor vehicle drivers. Little objective data is available on these impacts.

d) How the above information can be used to improve road safety

Road safety is complex, with many factors being involved in crashes. Rarely does a crash occur for a single, isolated reason, and the majority of crashes involve basic errors rather than risky behaviours. Therefore, there are multiple responses required to address the multiple factors. These may include:

- Improved support for young and disadvantaged groups to access newer, safer vehicles;
- Reductions in speed limits to 30 km/hr in areas of high pedestrian, cyclist, and other vulnerable road user traffic;
- Safe, separated infrastructure for cyclists;
- Include other sectors such as alcohol and other drugs, youth, mental health, etc. in road safety discussions;

Conclusion and Recommendations

COVID-19 has affected driving, transport patterns and use, and road trauma rates in numerous ways, and there are likely to be lasting impacts.(12) As restrictions ease, new patterns of behaviour will likely emerge. Working from home could become more prominent and would lessen the need for daily commuting. Those who do return to the workplace may be reluctant to use crowded public transit and choose to commute using private vehicles instead. The increase in alcohol and drug use, especially at different times and days, may persist, thereby increasing the potential for impaired driving. Increased levels of stress may affect driving behaviour and collision risk. Those experiencing mental health problems such as depression and anxiety may be differentially affected.

ACRS appreciates the opportunity to make this submission and contribute to improved road safety in Victoria. Please do not hesitate to contact us should you require any further information.



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