

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY ECONOMY AND INFRASTRUCTURE COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users

Melbourne—Tuesday 8 August 2023

MEMBERS

Alison Marchant—Chair

Kim O’Keeffe—Deputy Chair

Anthony Cianflone

Wayne Farnham

John Mullahy

Dylan Wight

Jess Wilson

WITNESSES

Dr Ben Rossiter, Executive Officer, and

Duane Burt, Principal Policy Adviser, Victoria Walks.

The CHAIR: Welcome to the public hearing of the Legislative Assembly Economy and Infrastructure Committee Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users. All mobile telephones should now be turned to silent.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard and broadcast live on the Parliament's website.

While all evidence taken by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, comments repeated outside this hearing, including on social media, may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts and other documents provided to the Committee during the hearing will be published on the Committee's website.

We will just do some introductions, and we will ask you to have an opening statement. I am Alison, the Member for Bellarine.

Jess WILSON: Jess Wilson, Member for Kew.

John MULLAHY: John Mullahy, Member for Glen Waverley.

The CHAIR: Dylan.

Wayne FARNHAM: Dylan has gone.

The CHAIR: Dylan will join us in a moment.

Wayne FARNHAM: Wayne Farnham, Member for Narracan.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Anthony Cianflone, Member for Pascoe Vale.

The CHAIR: I welcome some opening statements, if you would like. Thank you.

Dr Ben ROSSITER: Thank you. Look, thank you very much for the opportunity. We really appreciate it. I would like to start by just highlighting that walking for all purposes has increased over time every year, and in 2021 it accounted for nearly 23% of all trips. The pandemic, obviously, we all know accelerated walking a lot further, and changes to road safety behaviours during that time and since need to be considered within long-term trends. Over the last two decades the proportion of walkers killed on our streets and roads who were over the ages of 60 and 70 has risen—and we would like to leave you with a handout Duane will pass out, which gives you an outline of road trauma statistics over the last two and a bit decades. What the data really shows is pedestrian road trauma only dropped in 2020 and a bit of 2021, and that was because vehicle kilometres travelled had dropped substantially and the level of walking for older Victorians was much less, likely because of concerns over COVID. Over the last two decades the proportion of walkers aged over 60 has gone from 43%—and that is in the top table there—to 49%, and for walkers over the age of 70 it has gone from 30% to 36% in the current five-year period.

I would like to add that road trauma figures are often presented and discussed on a statewide level, but that can really obscure what is occurring for specific groups, and the vast majority of pedestrian trauma occurs in metro Melbourne. Even over the last decade a quarter of all transport-related fatalities in metro Melbourne were people walking. That is a quarter; that is quite a significant number. I would like to also add that three-quarters of walker fatalities in Melbourne are on 60 to 70 k roads—that is, state-controlled roads by and large.

So to just briefly outline some of the solutions, particularly around speed, infrastructure and road design and driver behaviour: speed is the big issue when it comes to road safety. We will not make progress unless we really start to address speed in urban areas—and our urban speeds are high by international standards. We need safer speeds on main roads, and we know the community wants that. An independent survey commissioned found that 54% want safer speeds on main roads and also want 30 kilometres an hour around schools, shops and, increasingly, in neighbourhoods. And as Troy mentioned earlier, there is no capacity within the State's speed guidelines to have 30 kilometres an hour; we just have trials.

To show how ridiculous that is, Yarra has had a six-year trial for 30-kilometre-an-hour speeds, and that is in backstreets that were built before the car—for horse and cart—and really dense, narrow streets. But it cannot be permanent. What we need to do is let communities and councils decide on local streets. This is really important, because at the moment we have to go through all the way to the Department—and often the minister—to have a change. Importantly, the community is there. We hear that you cannot make changes in speed; we have to bring the community along. But the community is already there. It is our decision-makers that have been slow.

I would add that it is an unpopular decision for some, but in terms of road safety we have made unpopular decisions in the past. Seatbelts, drink driving, speed cameras, booze buses—you name it—were all unpopular when they were first brought in, but speed we have to address. We need to make the arterials safer, with a combination of physical speed management and more crossings and safer speeds. Driver behaviour—we have an aggressive road culture. We cannot escape that. And drivers, we know, have a poor understanding of their obligations to pedestrians—to walkers—to give way, particularly when turning. We need to include mode shift—changing modes out of driving to walking and riding and public transport as a road safety strategy. If we have fewer vehicles on the roads, we know it is going to be safer. Internationally the cities with higher rates of walking, riding and public transport have lower road trauma. Investment—we need to have significant and ongoing, dedicated, pedestrian-specific road safety infrastructure funding, so road managers can go to a fund to actually fund what needs to be done rather than just leaving it to budgets, elections or whatever. We need to actually have it ongoing. We have not had one since 2010.

Two things to finish on: we need to have dedicated pedestrian expertise within the transport agencies. We do not have that. Despite 23% of trips being undertaken on foot, we do not have dedicated expertise that champions it within the transport agencies and that can go and ensure that we get the outcomes we need—and ensure we also meet other priorities across government. So we do not have that coordinated response within the agencies. And just an emerging issue that you might have seen in *The Age* over the weekend, things like the US-style mega utes that we are seeing in our urban areas and our streets and roads that are not designed for them. They are really, really concerning. It is just an emerging issue. That is partially more federal, but we need to address those sorts of things. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. I will open up to questions. We might stick to one question each for the moment, and then we can open it up for another round if we have got time. Jess.

Jess WILSON: Thank you. Thank you very much for your submission and for your opening statement. One of the issues we have been talking about today is speed, and the ability—and you spoke to this—around local councils having a greater say in reducing speed limits, given that they often understand their communities far better than the bureaucracy that often is VicRoads or the Department of Transport. When it comes to looking at shopping strips or school environments, one of the issues that gets raised with me consistently is the lack of the reduction of the speed limit, not so much in school zones but in shopping strips, but also around school zones the lack of pedestrian crossings that are in place. Having written to the Department and VicRoads, I understand that when you write, there is sort of a nothing answer that comes back: ‘We’ll look into this.’ What have been some of the experiences of where that has been successful, where you have seen pedestrian crossings come online, and what are some of the solutions you see about working more consistently with the departments or giving greater power to local councils?

Dr Ben ROSSITER: Yes, that is a good question. Thanks. The first thing I would say is, just to make the comment: with school zones what we need to do is think about kids getting all the way to school—how we get them actively walking and riding for the transport benefits, road safety, but also the physical and mental health benefits. School zones are really just the school gate, so they are not actually facilitating kids getting to school actively. We need to expand and take a precinct approach. Particularly on local streets, I think Merri-bek has done some really good work quite recently in behaviour change but also designing and providing things like raised threshold crossings, narrowing streets and, importantly, at crossings, slowing the approach speed. I know Maribyrnong has done a lot of great work. I think some of it is not just lowering the speed but also designing the speed to be lower, so it designs with a more human-centred approach. We are starting to see it, but we believe that local governments need the support of state and federal governments to actually increase the amount of investment and planning and to really plan routes so it is not just, ‘We do a little crossing here and we do something there,’ but we actually think about how we can get kids actively to school. We are not doing it as well as we should.

Jess WILSON: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

John MULLAHY: Thanks, Chair. How could the Victorian Government make paths shared with cyclists and e-scooters safer for pedestrians? I know I have got quite a few shared paths through my district of Glen Waverley, and we have got a couple of those coming online later this year. I would just be interested in what your view on that would be.

Dr Ben ROSSITER: Sure. It is a really good question. We have done quite a bit of research on this over the years. The short answer is: do not build them, to put it bluntly, particularly in urban areas where we mix high-speed commuter cyclists or sports cyclists or where there are more than 50 bike riders an hour. What we are doing is we are building shared facilities that do not work for a large section of the population. They do not work for older walkers. We know from research we commissioned that about 40% of seniors find them a barrier to their walking—that is, shared paths. We know from other research—a representative sample—that the second biggest barrier to walking locally was sharing with bikes, and that is really critical. It is critical for older walkers, people with disabilities and families with young kids. Kids off leash—they cannot be; they have got to be held together because of bikes. I am an everyday bike rider. We support safe, separated bike infrastructure, but shared paths do not work in urban areas. We should not be building them, and we should not be converting existing footpaths into shared paths, which happens as well. It is a really big issue. I will just say one of the things for seniors is we know that falls in the street are a really big issue; it puts three times as many people in hospital than road trauma. Five thousand Victorians a year end up in hospitals in emergency departments from falls. Concern about something startling or being hit by a bike puts them off walking, because if you fall and do your hip, you have got an up to 40% chance you are dead in 12 months. We should not be doing them. I hope that answered that.

Dylan WIGHT: Thank you so much for the submission, and thank you, Ben, for your opening remarks. You have already touched a couple of times on active transport. You spoke about it within school zones and kids getting to school, and you spoke about not just the benefit to physical and mental health but obviously the benefit to road users and congestion et cetera as well. What is the best way for the Victorian Government to really promote that and to get people out of their cars and onto public transport, walking, riding or whatever it may be, so we can get all of those benefits?

Dr Ben ROSSITER: There are a few things. One of the things is we do not find the terms ‘active transport’ or ‘vulnerable road users’ helpful. One of the reasons is that 90% of active transport is walking, but governments of all levels, when they think about active transport, usually focus on bike riding, or they do shared facilities thinking it will meet everyone’s needs. If we are thinking about walking, we have to really separate it out, because they are different people with different social and physical infrastructure needs. I think that is part of really separating it out and thinking, ‘What do we need to provide for them?’ With the example of active transport, I have seen government announcements over the years promoting walking and riding by doing a new active transport shared path next to a freeway. People do not go for a Sunday walk next to a freeway, and that will not help you get to the shops, to school and to services. I think we have got to separate it out and really look at it specifically. There is an issue around walking and riding and how it is held within the community. We all walk, but a challenge is getting government to support people to identify what they want in their community, which is really a walkable community where they can connect with neighbours and have the economic benefits associated with it. I think it is really trying to talk up the many co-benefits of having walkable communities. Does that answer that?

Dylan WIGHT: Yes, it does. Thanks for your answer.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Wayne.

Wayne FARNHAM: Thank you for your submission. I am quite curious about your statistics here that you put forward. The question I have for you is: are you concerned with pedestrian safety with the introduction of more e-scooters and electric vehicles, being that their noise levels are so low and obviously a lot of people might find it harder to hear them coming than a diesel engine, for example. I am interested in your thoughts on that.

Dr Ben ROSSITER: Yes, great. That is a good question, and e-scooters have been a major, major concern. They have a place in the transport system but not how they have been allowed to operate, particularly on footpaths. Also, there is no insurance for walkers who are injured by illegal behaviour, which might be riding on a footpath, not wearing a helmet, over the limit, two abreast, whatever it is. There is no insurance within the shared schemes, and there is no control effectively over private e-scooters. So, yes, there is a place, but it is not around footpaths, and that is not being considered adequately by levels of government—they are just kind of accepting it. So e-scooters are a concern.

E-vehicles—yes, from an environmental point of view, but they are not going to change road safety figures. They are not going to address road trauma, physical inactivity, congestion, all those bigger issues. They are not the magic bullet that some people would have us believe. I think we have to move towards sustainable modes and sustainable communities that are strong where people can live locally, which we saw happen in COVID and is continuing to a level. That is why walking and riding are far more important, so e-vehicles, yes.

E-buses are another—they are great, but nowhere in government do we have that emphasis on how do we increase bus patronage by making it safer and easier to walk to bus stops. We have clean buses, but why aren't we increasing patronage by making walkable areas? We know from the research we have done around bus stops that—predominantly on four lanes of traffic, two each way, high-speed roads buses make sense because they are bigger—there are buses but no crossing facilities nearby in a lot of them. We are not looking holistically at the transport system to think about how we meet multiple goals. We pick out 'We will do EVs here or we will do new mobilities there', but we are not looking at it holistically. And we obviously, no surprises, believe that we need to put people and walking first.

Duane BURTT: I might chip in there a little bit as well. I would just say that one thing that is neglected in the EV mix is the emergence of electric bikes, which make them heavier and faster, so the issues that you get on shared paths become more acute as well. It really just reinforces the case for separated bike and e-scooter facilities versus walking facilities.

Dr Ben ROSSITER: And a little touch on e-vehicles—the noise is an issue for vision-impaired walkers because they cannot hear them coming. And once EVs get up to a speed of about 40 or 50, they are saying, as with any vehicle, it is the tyres on the freeway that makes the noise, not the motor, so there are other benefits and disincentives we have to think about.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Anthony CIANFLONE: Thanks for your submission and for your evidence. It is really appreciated. From my community, we have had quite a few submissions from members or affiliate organisations of Victoria Walks that I guess complement a lot of those things you are talking about, which I acknowledge. And in that context, I guess I wanted to turn to—you mentioned some examples around where and how walking infrastructure is invested and delivered by government along major infrastructure and other areas in the community, but I guess my first question on that note is around, I guess, what can we draw from, what are the learnings from how the State Government has rolled out the level crossing removal projects across many of our communities, including for my community on the Upfield line, and the world-class corridor that has been provided there for pedestrians, cyclists and other users? How can that be leveraged, particularly by local governments, to help support or facilitate better walking connections to and from those major type of rail upgraded corridors?

And the second part of the question for me—sorry, Chair—is around your comments in the opening remarks around people over 60 being over-represented as pedestrian deaths and road trauma statistics, which is very tragic. But in that cohort I am particularly interested to understand what can we better do, particularly to protect and improve the safety for older residents of CALD communities—culturally and linguistically diverse communities? Obviously in the inner-city areas such as mine we have got quite a lot from Italian, Greek and other European and other non-English-speaking migrant backgrounds in that cohort now that are particularly vulnerable. I guess there are two questions there around sort of what are the learnings from LXRA projects and how can we support non-English-speaking people in the older cohort?

Dr Ben ROSSITER: Good questions. Level crossings—a lot of them, particularly where they have raised the line, have opened up communities and stopped the severance of train lines, which is great. Yes, they will

benefit recreational walking and riding, but they have not really looked at the transport networks or about how people get to shops, schools, services, destinations.

Upfield is an interesting one. We have argued and lobbied for over a decade to have safe separated walking and riding. They did that for the first time. They had a stretch of a couple of kilometres of walking and riding. However, and this is why I am not happy with level of the pedestrian expertise within the transport agencies, what they have done is they have got a separated bike path and at the station entrance walkers going in—like someone elderly, with vision impairment or a family with kids—have to stop and give way to riders. That should never happen. The hierarchy should be walkers first, particularly at the entrance. They have given priority to bike riders at station entrances like Moreland, and that should not have happened. That is likely a product of that lack of expertise within the agencies.

With what can we do within areas like your electorate, as you have described, I think the big thing is yes, a lot of CALD communities do walk more. As migrants they have come from countries and areas where they walk. I know in my own area the elderly who walk, and they are generally migrants who are walking. I think the key thing is we need to design for them. We know that road safety education for seniors does not work. It is about creating streets designed for walking. And seniors generally are very risk averse. They do not take risks. Data—a little project from the TAC some years ago found that older walkers were not at fault in 90% of crashes that affect them, so it really comes down to how do we design.

I think your electorate takes in Merri-bek and Moonee Valley. In Merri-bek about 48% of pedestrian fatalities this century have been over 70; and in Moonee Valley, 66%. It really comes down to we need to design the type of communities where they can be active and participate and be connected as long as possible. Again, stressing, it is not about education; it is creating the road environment that looks after them. Rather than tell them to take care, we need to create the environment that takes care of them.

The CHAIR: I might ask a question and build on that a little bit more. When you become a cyclist and then you are back in your car, you are very much more educated in how cyclists may feel on the road, very similar to being a walker. As you have said here in your submission, in this trend of over a decade we have not seen a decrease in pedestrian deaths. Is there an education piece there that needs to happen? We have sort of done pretty well on educating people on keeping a distance from cyclists and other vulnerable users—school zones, those things. Is there something of an education piece that we might be missing?

Dr Ben ROSSITER: Yes, there really is. There is education about road culture and road behaviour but also, as I said, road rules. Left- and right-turning vehicles, by and large, that are supposed to give way I think account for over 25% of crashes. With older pedestrians particularly, 16% of their crashes are on footpaths. We tell them ‘Walk on footpaths, you’re safe’. Well, 16% of their crashes are actually on footpaths or with reversing vehicles, so I think yes, there is. When we have seen any road safety education around road rules it really appears to be something internal that VicRoads or the Department has created and put through their social media. We need actual mass communication campaigns which are out there so people understand. We did with motorbikes, with a spike in motorbike road trauma—we had a lot we saw on television and across multimedia. We do not see it with walking.

I think we need to look at that, but it is, again, around that road culture; it is aggressive. Anyone who has travelled overseas in countries with low levels of road trauma knows it is different. It is not just the speed; it is the culture. A concern of ours is whether that is increasing, and it would appear so. I think education has a role, but speed, design, infrastructure and education—changing that behaviour is really critical.

The CHAIR: And just to follow up, over that COVID period—you talked about that aggressive behaviour. Have you got any thoughts on COVID?

Dr Ben ROSSITER: One of the things which is frustrating with COVID is in terms of behaviour change there is a science, and I am not behaviour change scientist, about getting people to recognise they have got a problem, to pre contemplate, contemplate, plan, do and then there is relapse and what to do, so there is all this science. What happened during COVID is that we went from extended periods of stay-at-home orders straight to the doing stage. No government has been looking at, ‘Well, actually, how do we keep this high level of walking?’ How do we keep this high level of community connection, which is good for strong economic vibrant communities? You all remember we had our ‘Life. Be In It’, ‘Go for your life’, all these about ‘you

must walk’—but we did it. No-one said, ‘How do we keep it there?’ That lost opportunity—we still have an opportunity to keep that going from COVID so people are, as mentioned before, living local, working locally as much as they can and working from home. We are not exploiting that. We are not creating the type of communities where people can and do walk to shops, although we do know pre COVID the majority of people living within 2 kilometres walked to milk bars, pubs, restaurants, cafes, so we know—and even a third walked to supermarkets. People say, ‘I’ve got to drive to the supermarket’, but the Government’s transport data is showing a high proportion of people will actually walk to supermarkets, and people who walk to the local shops go more frequently and spend more money over a longer term than those who drive, and this is in a range of international studies. We are missing opportunities to really look at this in a coordinated way, so it is not just road safety but a number of other community and government priorities.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We have got a few minutes left. I might just open it up if there are any burning questions. John, to you.

John MULLAHY: I am always the one with the data, so how can the Victorian Government improve its data capture to reflect pedestrian trauma more accurately?

Dr Ben ROSSITER: Do you want to have a go at that one, Duane?

Duane BURTT: Yes, sure. There is some work underway to match the police-captured data on road trauma with the hospital admissions data. That needs to be extended to the hospital emergency department data. We also need to look at the way pedestrian crashes are classified. There is a system of codes they call the DCA codes which the police use to code crashes. For pedestrians they are very unhelpful. Most crashes get coded under ‘near side’, ‘far side’ or ‘other’, which are very difficult codes to identify any kind of cause or circumstance to the crash, so we need to review those. The complication there is that they are Australian standards, so we would have to go Australia wide.

John MULLAHY: Just on that, you cannot actually find out if it is a bike, e-scooter or anything—it is literally—

Duane BURTT: No, the data does capture who is involved in the crash. There are usually two parties, so it captures both of them. It is a driver—a car—and a pedestrian or a bike and a pedestrian, we know that stuff, and the hospital data gives us plenty of information about the types of injuries that you get in crashes and so on. But what the data does not really tell us is what are the circumstances of that crash. For example, we did a more detailed analysis of crashes where we had a consultant a few years ago look at over a thousand individual crashes for older pedestrians and what are the crash circumstances, so once you get down to that level of data you can start to find out things like the most significant crash scenario for older people is a right-turning vehicle hitting them as the vehicle exits the intersection. That is about 20% of crashes—

Dr Ben ROSSITER: And often from behind, so the elderly person is hit from behind.

Duane BURTT: Yes, but the way the police data is generally captured it is very difficult to capture those kinds of circumstances and understand those kinds of circumstances. It is a very complicated world, the data collection world. There are a number of agencies involved, but we need to be looking. Generally, we could do a lot better about capturing crash circumstances, which would help us understand crash causes and then we could actually respond.

Dr Ben ROSSITER: And I would add to that also type of vehicle. We now have bigger fronted, more SUVs and some really big SUVs. We are not able to distinguish the type of vehicle. In the US they have thought that the significant increase in pedestrian trauma over the last 10 years is because of SUVs, mega-utes and big utes and that sort of thing. We cannot easily tell that sort of thing.

The CHAIR: Wayne, I will let you jump in quickly if you have got a quick one.

Wayne FARNHAM: I do have a quick one. I have listened to what you have said, and a lot of what you have said about connectivity applies pretty well in metro. What about regional Victoria, where areas are bigger and obviously the cost to do the work is a lot more?

Dr Ben ROSSITER: When we surveyed one of the key differences between regional areas, which is not something the State often supports but they should be, is things like footpaths. It is a much greater concern and a barrier to people walking in regional areas—things like footpaths but also, the same thing, crossing roads. Regional roads are often big and wide, particularly going through built environments, towns and cities. There are some of the similar things there, but we do need to address things like footpaths and infrastructure so that people can walk. Going back to the point about modal shift, road safety should be about getting people out of vehicles but giving them options.

Duane BURTT: But the other thing there is sure, regional areas are obviously bigger, but the concentration of pedestrians and pedestrian crashes and so on is around towns and particularly town centres, so we can focus our investment on town centres in regional towns and that is going to deliver effective responses, I think.

Dr Ben ROSSITER: For a regional city, my favourite is Warrnambool—what they have done in the Warrnambool central area. Their CBD is just off the highway, and with state and federal support they have redesigned their main street, which is now a 30 k 850 metres. It looks like a people place, and the surrounding streets—I think some of the regional cities are doing great things, but they need more support to take it to another level.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for coming today and answering our questions, and for your submission to the Inquiry. It was very fascinating, your submission, so thank you very much for your time today.

Dr Ben ROSSITER: It is a pleasure. Thank you, and congratulations on conducting the Inquiry. It is very important, so I look forward to reading it.

Witnesses withdrew.