INQUIRY INTO THE IMPACT OF ROAD SAFETY BEHAVIOURS ON VULNERABLE ROAD USERS

Organisation: Merri-bek Bicycle User Group
Date Received: 19 May 2023
Merri-bek Bicycle User Group Submission to Parliamentary Inquiry into Road Behaviours and Impact on Vulnerable Road Users

Submission by Merri-bek Bicycle User Group Inc
Submitted by Lisa O’Halloran, Secretary
Contact: committee@morelandbug.org

Merri-bek Bicycle User Group (Merri-bek BUG) is an advocacy group - run by resident volunteers who advocate for greater and safer commuter and recreational cycling in the City of Merri-bek. We have over six hundred and fifty members in the City of Merri-bek which includes the suburbs of Brunswick, Coburg, Pascoe Vale, Oak Park, Hadfield, Glenroy, Fawkner and Gowanbrae.

Merri-bek BUG Survey

In response to the Parliamentary Inquiry into the Impact of Road Safety Behaviours on Vulnerable Road Users, Merri-bek BUG conducted an online survey. One hundred and eleven responses were received - with 77.5% of respondents reporting that they have noted a change in road users behaviour for the worse, since the onset of the Covid pandemic.

Survey responses received from a representative gender split, and a range of ages. Whilst the majority of responses are from those aged 21-49, 29% percent of responses were received from those over 50.

Please select the gender you identify with
111 responses

- 46.8% Male
- 52.3% Female
- 1.9% Non-Binary
In addition, 37.8% of respondents regularly rode with children and 93.7% rode bicycles for the purposes of transport, rather than purely for recreation.

Some respondents made it clear that gaps in the network of safe infrastructure, and poor perceptions of safety, limited their ability to participate in activities, and sometimes put them in conflict with other vulnerable road users. One respondent shared that;

*I ride on footpaths where separated bike paths are not possible - and that then contributes to pedestrian congestion, which I know is uncivic of me but I just feel much safer on the footpath, especially with two small children on the back of the bike. Also, we don't have a car, so I have no alternatives and sometimes pass up on doing certain things if I cannot get there and back on the bike safely.*
Almost 6% use a bike for transport due to a medical condition or disability that precluded them from driving or legally holding a drivers licence. Three of those respondents are unable to drive, use public transport independently or comfortably walk 2km, reinforcing the importance of bicycles in providing independent mobility options for people with broad ranging mobility needs.

**Respondent Profile**

*Lucy, of Brunswick rides for transport, often with her child. Because of the medication required to treat her chronic migraines she is unable to drive a car.*

*Lucy has observed road user behaviour worsen since the onset of the Covid 19 pandemic particularly amongst truck drivers and drivers of trade vehicles. She feels less safe riding on roads and reports drivers being more likely to be using a mobile phone or being distracted and being more aggressive.*

*Lucy tries not to ride at peak hour, which limits her and her child’s mobility and has had two incidents where trade vehicles have driven within centimeters of her handlebars while overtaking her on quiet streets.*

*Of using her bicycle Lucy says; “Being able to ride my bike is essential to my mental health, because of the freedom it brings, as well as the everyday convenience. It allows me to feel integrated into my community. And being able to ride safely with my child on my bike creates shared moments of simple happiness with my child.”*
Aggression and Road Rage

The number one issue, identified by 64.9% of survey respondents, was drivers being ‘more aggressive’ since the onset of the Covid19 pandemic. Examples given included aggressive driving behaviour - including entering intersections without room to cross, blocking keep clear areas, failing to give way, tailgating bike riders and failing to observe minimum passing distance laws. Some respondents also referred to verbal abuse, physical intimidation and ‘impatient drivers’ honking horns at bike riders.

One survey respondent shared their story;

In 2022 I was riding my cargo bike on Sydney Rd. A woman in a white SUV began to squeeze me into the parked cars, so I yelled out. After telling me to f*** off, she proceeded to chase me through side streets all the way to Melville Rd in Brunswick West where I managed to turn her around in a street with a median concrete divider.

Many others recounted similar experiences.

Distracted Driving

Mobile phone use and distracted driving was identified as an issue by 63% of respondents, who reported this as a noticeable change since the onset of the pandemic.

**Respondent Profile**

Sam* of Coburg rides with a disability or medical condition and is not able to independently drive a car.

They have noticed a change in road user behaviour since the onset of Covid 19 pandemic, primarily amongst the drivers of motor vehicles who they report as more likely to go through red lights at intersections and pedestrian crossings and be distracted and/or using a mobile phone while driving.

Sam experiences more near misses and has to rely more on their own anticipation of a driver’s mistake or illegal action to avoid being involved in a crash and feels less safe riding than before the pandemic.

*Sam is a pseudonym, not the respondents real name
Changes in Movement Patterns

A number of respondents reported that there seems to be more vehicular traffic - which is attributed to an aversion to public transport, as well as increased flexibility meaning many people are spending more time local to their homes or travelling outside traditional peak times.

An increase in rat running, where vehicles use residential streets to avoid traffic on major roads, was noted in many survey responses. One responder shared that:

*In the past two years I’ve had two incidents where trades vehicles have deliberately driven within a few centimeters of my handlebars as they overtake me on quiet streets.*

Changes in Commercial Vehicle Types

Survey respondents identified that the prevalence of ride share vehicles has made these vehicles less identifiable and therefore less predictable. One respondent said:

*Since Uber has begun, it is hard to identify which cars are Ubers... when it was just cabs on the road they were easy to identify and be conscious that they may stop without warning.*

Changes in Delivery Modes

The pandemic resulted in an increase in the use of home delivery services. These include take away food deliveries, commonly completed by small vehicles or bikes, and home delivery / parcel services, which are typically in large trucks and vans.

Food delivery e-bikes have been identified as behaving ‘unpredictably’ on roads, on bike infrastructure and on footpaths. They are perceived as ‘flipping between being a cyclist and motor vehicle’ and being difficult to interact with in traffic.

Increased volumes of supermarket home delivery have increased the frequency of rigid trucks in residential streets. Previously this was an infrequent occurrence associated with moving or large item deliveries. The decision of Coles and Woolworths to utilise a 8m rigid truck fleet, particularly in inner urban areas, increases the risk to vulnerable route users who utilise ‘back street’ routes in the absence of protected and separated bike infrastructure in key transport corridors.

Increasing Passenger Vehicle Sizes

Car types in Australia have grown substantially larger over the years - with the use of SUVs and 4WDs becoming prevalent. A number of survey respondents expressed concern about the increasing number of ‘American style’ utilities on Victorian roads. With vehicles like the Dodge
RAM and Ford F150 weighing over three tonnes, both the perception of risk and the actual risk posed to vulnerable road users is clear. As Monash University lecturer Julian O'Shea recently reported in The Age, not only does the geometry of these vehicles create more blind spots, but children stuck by these vehicles are eight times more likely to be killed\(^1\).

A number of respondents also felt that the width of ‘pick up truck’ style vehicles made them less safe on roads without separated and protected bike lanes. Respondents reported feeling that they were being squeezed closer to parked cars or into gutters when riding on roads alongside these vehicles.

**Introduction of E-Scooters**

Newer road users, such as scooter riders, seem to be causing anxiety, particularly amongst older survey respondents. Scooter riders were identified as being less predictable, difficult to hear approaching, and less likely to follow road rules.

---

**Respondent Profile**

*Sarah* is over 65 and lives in Pascoe Vale. She uses her bicycle for both transport and recreation and is concerned about those riding delivery scooters and electric bikes and reports their road behaviour can be confusing.

*In addition she reports that other road users, such as motor vehicles, are often not aware of cyclists on the road, especially when turning left and crossing a designated bike lane.*

*Sarah is a pseudonym, not the respondents real name*

---

**Conflicts on Shared Paths**

Shared paths were identified as a flash point for many users - with the needs of pedestrians, bike riders and other small personal transport users coming into conflict during the acute phase of the pandemic and into the present day. Many respondents reported reluctantly using footpaths to bridge gaps in safe, separated infrastructure. Others noted that the pressure on shared infrastructure is building with the introduction of scooters, e-bikes and large cargo bikes, in addition to traditional bikes and pedestrians. This feedback points to a need to expand the network of safe, separated bike infrastructure and confirms that bike paths shared with pedestrians are only acceptable when no other option exists.

---

Adopting a Safe Systems Approach in Victoria

Victoria has adopted a Safe Systems approach to road safety but respondent’s experiences and recent incidents on Victoria’s road and shared path infrastructure indicate that there is a gap between policy and implementation.

The starting point for the Safe System approach is that everyone, regardless of what mode of transport they choose, arrives alive.\(^2\) The approach acknowledges that people make mistakes which can lead to accidents, but takes an approach to road design that minimises the consequences of those inevitable mistakes. It results in the development of safe, forgiving systems, with layered protective effects - so that if one part fails, the others will still protect people.

In practice, this means separating vehicles of incompatible speeds and masses, especially when vehicular traffic is travelling above 30 kilometers per hour.

In the words of one survey respondent, we need Safe Systems infrastructure as:

> Education and enforcement can only achieve so much and they have been achieving little to date. It is shocking how few drivers are aware of their obligations, especially to walkers (eg: at intersections) and to cyclists at intersections.

Building the Protected Bike Lane Network

Extending the network of protected bike infrastructure will also address many of the issues identified by our survey respondents. To be effective, bike infrastructure needs to be direct, visible, safe and separated from traffic. Between these networks, modal filters, 30km speed zones and low traffic neighbourhoods are effective in designated people priority areas - low speed, safe zones where pedestrians and bike riders are prioritised, visible and kept safe.

Recent research by Dr Lauren Pearson at Monash University, has also found that protected bike lanes limit interactions between bikers and car drivers, not only reducing the risk of injury but also reducing the incidence of motorist aggression and harassment of bike riders.\(^3\)

---


\(^3\) [https://theconversation.com/how-to-get-more-women-on-bikes-better-biking-infrastructure-designed-by-women-202147](https://theconversation.com/how-to-get-more-women-on-bikes-better-biking-infrastructure-designed-by-women-202147)