

# Open Road Syndrome: the new road safety virus?

27 April 2020

## Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has affected every aspect of daily life including road safety.

As the weeks and months have rolled by, traffic volumes and fatal crashes appear to have fallen but adverse driver behaviour such as drink driving and speeding are still a concern, perhaps more so now. At the same time, cars are sitting idle as walking and cycling increase.

This paper looks at the road safety by-products of coronavirus and with an eye towards the future.

## Traffic Volumes down

One of the by-products of global government restrictions on personal movement has been a reduction in road travel, particularly personal trips in private cars and light vehicles.

Transurban, Australia's largest operator of toll roads, released its March Quarter 2020 Update to the Australia Stock Exchange on 16 April 2020 [1].

Included in the update were figures that showed the decline in average daily traffic (ADT) in each state. Between the weeks commencing 1 March 2020 and 5 April 2020, ADT in Sydney had fallen by 40%, Melbourne 53% and Brisbane 38%.

Large vehicle traffic on the Transurban network also fell but not to the same degree (Sydney 11%, Melbourne 14%, Brisbane 12%), underscoring how important the transport sector has been during this crisis.

On 18 April 2020, the Daily Telegraph said that "data from Transport for NSW shows traffic volumes on the road network across Sydney have fallen by about 55% over the past four weeks" [2].

We look to the release of traffic volume data for regional areas to see if travel on country roads has fallen to the same extent as those in Sydney but for now, make a note of that **55% reduction** figure.

World Bank Head of Road Safety, Dr Soames Job, recently wrote about reducing *exposure* to crashes and associated road trauma as it relates to reduced global road traffic [3].

***Reducing exposure to road transport.** While lockdowns have had enormous economic and social impacts, the benefits of reduced transport identified during lockdowns are profound and go beyond valuable decreases in road crash deaths and disabling injuries. These impacts on transport bring into sharp focus the value of exposure reduction as an intervention for road safety. Up to now, exposure reduction has been largely overlooked because road safety has been too narrowly focused on the road transport system itself.*

As traffic volumes and exposure to road transport fall, we can look at available data for fatal crashes to see if fewer people are losing their lives.

## Reductions in Road Deaths

The media has reported that COVID-19 related restrictions on movements have been accompanied by fewer road deaths in 2020 and over Easter when Australians stayed home [4].

Each month, the Australian Government Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Communications issues a bulletin on Australian road deaths [5]. BITRE data confirms a 13% national reduction in road deaths for March 2020 compared to March 2019.

The data in the following table is drawn from BITRE monthly bulletins for the past four years and relates to NSW. Note that these figures may differ from annual reports published by state road authorities as data can change over time due to coronial findings and deaths recorded after the date of publication.

### NSW Road Deaths (BITRE Data)

Month	3 Year Average (2017-19)	2020	Difference
Jan	35	24	Minus 11
Feb	26	28	Plus 2
Mar	31	24	Minus 7
	<b>92</b>	<b>76</b>	<b>Minus 16</b>

The BITRE data does confirm a reduction of road deaths in NSW in 2020 but that state has been heavily impacted by COVID-19 and bushfire related road closures. February 2020, arguably the only 'normal' month of the year for travel movements saw a slight increase in road deaths compared to the three-year-average.

According to BITRE, in the key measure of road deaths per 100,000, NSW now sits at 4.08. By comparison, at the end of 2014, the year that annual lives lost on NSW roads was acclaimed as the lowest in decades, deaths per 100,000 was 4.09.

Yet the reduction in road deaths during March was 23% at a time when traffic volumes had fallen by twice that amount.

## Road Deaths Mid-March to Mid-April 2020

The period from mid-March to mid-April 2020 took in two key events:

1. The announcement on 16 March 2020 by various Australian police forces that they would cease large Random Breath Testing (RBT) operations.
2. The Easter long weekend which is traditionally accompanied by a five-day maximum enforcement period and double demerits in some states (NSW – 9 to 13 April 2020).

Data on fatal crashes appears on state government department or police websites. When the RBT decision was announced, figures for lives lost NSW, Victoria and Queensland were captured for later comparison.

The following tables contain provisional fatal crash data for the period of about one month since RBT operations ceased. Only publicly available data has been used so the dates do not align perfectly across the three states selected. Again, data is subject to change.

**Comparison of Road Fatalities Mid-March to Mid-April in NSW, Victoria and Queensland**

YTD Totals	NSW	YTD Totals	VIC	YTD Totals	QLD
16/03/2020	67	16/03/2020	58	15/03/2020	37
15/04/2020	94	16/04/2020	73	15/03/2019	56
<b>Deaths during period</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>Deaths during period</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>Deaths during period</b>	<b>19</b>
16/03/2019	86	16/03/2019	64	15/03/2019	33
15/04/2019	118	16/04/2019	89	15/03/2019	52
<b>Deaths during period</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>Deaths during period</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>Deaths during period</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>Reduction in Deaths</b>	5	<b>Reduction in Deaths</b>	10	<b>Reduction in Deaths</b>	No change
<b>% Reduction for period in 2020</b>	14%	<b>% Reduction for period in 2020</b>	40%	<b>% Reduction for period in 2020</b>	0%

*Table Notes: NSW figures from: Centre for Road Safety Data, Vic figures from: Victoria Police (March data and) and Herald Sun Newspaper (April Data) Qld figures from: Queensland Government Road Crash Weekly Report*

Whilst these figures seem to confirm a general reduction in road fatalities, the scale of the fall has not matched the 55% average reduction in traffic volumes reported earlier.

How much should they have fallen by? Have some motorists taken advantage of less congestion and *open road syndrome* to go faster and is this why fatalities are not falling at the same rate as traffic volumes?

### **Coronavirus stops RBT**

Monday 16 March 2020 may one day be recorded as the date of a pivotal event in Australian road safety.

On 16 March 2020, media reports announced that several police jurisdictions in Australia had halted large scale random breath testing operations due to the potential infection risk posed to members by the virus. This was later confirmed in various statements by the law enforcement bodies [6].

Until that time, NSW was on the cusp of having a debate about measures that could be used to reduce the number of lives lost and people injured as a result of road trauma.

Prior to COVID-19 travel restrictions, the NSW Government had planned to discuss a range of measures with selected delegates at a *Towards Zero Road Safety Summit* in Sydney on 23 March 2020.

On 1 February 2020, four children riding their bicycles to buy ice cream died after they were hit by a car on a suburban street in metropolitan Sydney. The driver, a 29-year-old man, returned an alleged blood alcohol reading of 0.150. He was later charged with driving with the presence of cocaine and ecstasy in his system.

The crash left a nation stunned and began a debate on drink driving, what the appropriate blood alcohol content limit should be, whether passengers in a car being driven by an alleged drink driver should also be charged and what the appropriate penalties should be in each case.

Questions were also raised about penalties for drink driving offences after a high-profile fitness entrepreneur was convicted of driving with a mid-range prescribed concentration of alcohol in Sydney. When stopped by police, the person's primary school age son was found to be a passenger in the car.

The following quotes reflected the divergence of views on the suspension of RBT.

Police Association of NSW [7]

*The NSW Police Commissioner and the Minister for Emergency Services announced that police 'may decide it is not reasonable to undertake stationary Random Breath Testing and Random Drug Testing in the current climate'.*

*In a statement released on Tuesday, a spokesperson said, 'Police officers will therefore use their discretion to determine the viability of conducting stationary RBT and RDT'.*

*NSW Police Association president Tony King went a step further, declaring that police would not be undertaking static tests, where multiple cars are pulled over at a time.*

*They would still be conducting random tests in other circumstances, such as when someone was suspected of being under the influence, or was caught speeding.*

*'With the devices in a stationary RBT set up, police could be testing 50, 60, 100 people over and over again,' Mr King said.*

*'This is about keeping people safe.'*

By Paul Bibby

Brian Dorsett, Gorokan [8]

*Because of the COVID-19 virus we are all now free to drink while driving, drive our unregistered motor vehicles whilst unlicensed, drive loaded up on drugs – the list goes on. Someone high up, whoever it may be, has made one heck of a blunder letting the media know that random breath testing has been suspended due to the virus.*

*Just when government is faced with unfortunate deaths from the virus, we have something worsening the situation with this unbelievable statement. Please tell me it's only a dream.*

Ironically, the cessation of large scale RBT operations coincided with the release by *Austrroads* of a major report on Drink Driving Countermeasures which called for "improving general deterrence through more highly visible and randomised enforcement" [9].

As with traffic volumes, it seems that coronavirus has affected alcohol consumption in Australia and overseas are consuming alcohol.

Data recently released shows one-in-five Australians have purchased more alcohol than usual during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the majority are drinking more and have concerns about their alcohol use and the drinking of others in their household [10].

In the United States, sales of takeaway and online alcohol are increasing at a rate that is "more than offsetting declines" in liquor sales from licensed premises that are currently closed [11].

Increased sales have also been observed by Australian online wine retailer *Vinomofo* who report a 50 to 75 per cent increase in sales since venues closed [12].

In the absence of police risk assessments, no comment on the decision to suspend RBT activities is made. COVID-19 does pose risks for law enforcement; the New York Police Department has reported the deaths of 27 police officers from Coronavirus as of 17 April 2020.

It is noted senior police and industrial officials from unions representing police members agreed with the decision and motorists pulled over in mobile traffic stops would continue to be breath tested.

Not all random breath and drug testing activities have ceased as this example from the NSW Police Force Traffic and Highway Patrol Command Facebook page shows.

Traffic and Highway Patrol Command Facebook Page, 19 April 2020

**Traffic and Highway Patrol Command - NSW Police Force**  
14 hrs · 🌐

Question? Police aren't doing breath testing during the Coronavirus are they?  
Answer. Yes they certainly are, not just random mobile RBT but RDT, small and large scale operations are occurring including the one this afternoon in a suburb near you.  
We'll be reporting back tonight on what we found in the target suburbs so stay tuned!

Following on from the earlier testing post, tonights operation focused on drug driving in the Eastern Beaches area including the suburbs of Maroubra, Malabar, Matraville, Chifley, Little Bay and regrettably whilst there was less traffic on the roads, results once again demonstrated the number of drivers irresponsibly using illicit drugs and driving.

One in 10 drivers returned a positive result for drugs such as cannabis, cocaine, meth & combinations of a number of illicit drugs.  
190 tests - 19 positives.

One driver attempting to evade police driving in a manner dangerous was arrested and returned a positive cannabis result. Other drivers stopped, if not arrested for drug driving were charged for disqualified, suspended, unlicensed driving.

Road Safety is our commitment to all road users and whilst only essential travel should be occurring, let's make a concerted effort to travel safely!  
#noalcoholnodrugdriving

With road trauma costing the Australian community over \$30 billion annually [13], a long-term reduction in RBT cannot be a good for road safety.

*“Random breath testing has a Dose - Response relationship; jurisdictions that have reduced RBT have suffered from an increase in serious injury and fatal crashes.”*

Professor Ian Johnston [14]

At this stage, there is no publicly available data on which to conclude if road safety has been compromised because of the suspension of RBT. However, incidents such the charging of a high-profile professional sportsperson following an alleged alcohol-related, fail to stop crash in Melbourne on 16 April 2020 could give rise to such concerns.

It would be interesting to learn in any future Court hearings or through traffic offender programs if drivers arrested for drink-driving during this crisis weighed the risks of being caught as being lower than previously the case.

Restrictions of movements and activities are likely to remain even after the flattening of the curve. But one of the first actions needed is the restoration of the general deterrence of RBT through pre-coronavirus levels of testing.

Allowing unnecessary road trauma to take place would only compound the tragedy that has been the global loss of life this year, regardless of its cause.

Fully restoring RBT by eliminating or minimising risk could be the ultimate collaboration of law enforcement, road safety, work safety, health, and police unions.

### Reported Road User Behaviour

Since the escalation in coronavirus cases and the imposition of “lockdowns” and other restrictions on personal movements, reports of adverse road user behaviour in Australia and overseas have been documented.

Over what is normally a busy Easter period on NSW roads, police conduct Operation Tortoise. Although large-scale drink and drug driving operations were suspended, motorists continued to be stopped for a range of matters.

At 1.15am on Sunday 12 April 2020, South Coast Highway Patrol detected sedan travelling at a speed of 191km/h in a 100km/h zone. After locating the driver who allegedly tried to hide and resist arrest, the 34-year-old man was charged with a range of offences including mid-range drink driving and breaching a previous bail condition. It is also alleged that the man’s seven-year-old daughter was unrestrained in the back seat of the vehicle at the time of the offences [15].

Police in Victoria also reported matters involving excessive speed, alcohol or both.

NSW Centre for Road Safety’s Mr Bernard Carlon told 2GB news on 14 April 2020 that speeding detections were up in for this Easter period compared to 2019 and expressed concern regarding deteriorating driver behaviour.

NSW Police Force Commissioner Mick Fuller agreed, adding that “one concerning statistic is a significant increase in speeding, particularly over the speed limit by more than 30km/ and 45km/h which have increased by more than 40 percent on the same time last year” [16].

The increase in higher end speeding that Commissioner Fuller spoke about warrants closer examination.

Reports on changing driver behaviour are not confined to Australia as the following example show. They also demonstrate how increased vehicle speeds adversely impact on other road users.

#### US Governors Highway Safety Association: [17]

- In **New York City**, despite far fewer vehicles on the road, the city’s automated speed cameras issued 24,765 speeding tickets citywide on March 27, or nearly double the 12,672 tickets issued daily a month earlier.
- In **Los Angeles**, speeds are up by as much as 30% on some streets, prompting changes to traffic lights and pedestrian walk signals.
- Some states are finding reduced crash rates but more serious crashes. In **Massachusetts**, the fatality rate for car crashes is rising, and in **Nevada** and **Rhode Island**, state officials note pedestrian fatalities are rising.
- In **Minnesota**, motor vehicle crashes and fatalities have more than doubled compared to the same time period in previous years. Half those deaths were related to speeding or to careless or negligent driving.

### Hawaii News Now: [18]

- Honolulu police have noticed an increase in speeding and jaywalking in recent weeks as fewer vehicles take to the roads following the stay-at-home order. Officers have spotted drivers speeding mainly on freeways and highways, according to the department. They emphasized that there is no reason to rush.
- “From March 16 to April 15, we have issued 1,422 speeding citations as well as 471 excessive speeding citations — that would be speeds 30 miles or more over the speed limit,” said Sgt Dana Souza of the Honolulu Police Department.
- Officers are also seeing more pedestrians jaywalking.
- “The pedestrians now are choosing to not follow the ‘Don’t Walk’ signs or jaywalk. Instead of crossing at crosswalks, they choose to cross mid-block,” said Souza.
- Pedestrian safety advocates want to make sure that people don’t have a false sense of security when they head out to exercise.

### Emergency Services News (UK): [19]

- The Metropolitan Police has reported a worrying increase in the number of instances of motorists caught ‘extreme speeding’ on the streets of the capital during the national lockdown. The Met’s Lead on Investigation for Fatal & Serious road collisions, Supt Andy Cox, has asked people to view these speeding motorists the same way as they would drink drivers.
- Police forces around the country have found that some motorists are taking advantage of the lack of vehicles on the road by driving at ‘ridiculous’ speeds.

Perhaps the increase in speed detections have best been summed by the Tampa Bay Times who on 18 April 2020 published an article entitled, *Open Road Syndrome? Tampa Bay speeds up during the crisis*. The article featured examples from the city’s red light/speed cameras of vehicles travelling through intersections at high speed, endangering the lives of motorists and pedestrians [20].

Whether *Open Road Syndrome* has indeed emerged as a by-product of the coronavirus pandemic is another area for study.

### **Bicycle Sales Increase**

Drivers are not the only road users to be affected by COVID-19 with the increase in active transport being one piece of good news emerging from the crisis.

Government-imposed movement restrictions during the crisis allow for exercise and walking is perhaps the one activity that can be legally performed outside of the house without the need for equipment (or ability).

Reports have also highlighted dramatic increases in sales of all types of bicycles, with retailers having to put more staff on to keep up with demand. [21]

With households investing in cycling, there are opportunities to consolidate increases in riding into the post-coronavirus world.

With unemployment rising and dire warnings about the economic state of the world, large and expensive infrastructure projects have been put forward by governments as a means of getting people back to work and kick-starting the economy. These projects need to cater for bicycle riding as well as motor vehicles.

The downside of spending on large scale infrastructure could be that funding for smaller projects could become scarce this decade. Active transport supporters should be looking for modest local projects that can benefit safety in local communities.

### The 1.5 Metres

According to BITRE data, 39 bicycle riders were killed in Australia in 2019, an increase of five on 2018 [22].

Therefore, in some Australian states, it is the law that motor vehicles must keep at least one metre away from bicycle riders when passing them. On roads with a speed limit higher than 60km/h, that distance increases to 1.5 metres. A 2016 CARRS-Q report [23] had this to say about the minimum passing distance (MPD) rule:

*It was generally noted that there is limited enforcement of the MPD rule and that it is reactive and potentially less than cyclists would prefer. The reasons given for the limited amount of enforcement related to difficulties in collecting sufficient evidence to withstand potential contest and therefore resistance to allocating large amounts of resources to collection of evidence.*

CARRS-Q Minimum Passing Distance Road Rule Evaluation –Final Report

One aspect of the battle against COVID-19 has been the rapid development of public messaging, particularly around the new phenomenon of “social distancing”. Overnight, materials have been released outlining the need for people to stay 1.5 metres apart.

The images below compare coronavirus social distancing messaging to bicycle MPD requirements. Both images seem to be conveying the same message.

### Distance Messages



Image Left: Bicycle NSW



Image Right: Australian Govt

A survey released by the Australia Bureau of Statistics found 98% of people were practicing social distancing. For such a new message, this is a remarkable level of community understanding and acceptance of this public health message [24].

Yet when it comes to the keeping away from bicycles, groups representing riders have long complained of a lack of awareness, enforcement, and compliance of MPD laws [25].

Individuals can practice social distancing by keeping two arms lengths from another person. It's a rough guide but one that is easily understood. Although we are only a few months into



this pandemic, are there lessons for road safety that we can take away from the apparent success of COVID-19 social distancing messaging?

Do lawmakers and road safety advocates need to reconsider how MDP laws are written to make them easier to understand, follow and prove?

## Conclusion

Comprehensive data including injury and alcohol crashes, police activities and outcomes, etc. is required before conclusions from being drawn as to the ultimate effect of COVID-19 on road safety. We should expect to see academic research on the subject into 2021 and beyond.

It was only in February 2020 that the *Stockholm Declaration* was issued following the Third Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety.

The declaration called attention to “the damaging impact of road crashes and related deaths and injuries on long-term national economic growth” [26].

As countries grapple with how they can re-open society and the economy, road safety must be one of the first things to re-emerge as “business as usual”.



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**RTSZero**

*This work is their personal analysis of current events.*

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