

Secretary: *Paul Hare*

SUBMISSION NO. 15

RECO Cyclists' Urban Speedlimit Taskforce

An Initiative of the Bicycle Federation of Australia

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HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
STANDING COMMITTEE ON TRANSPORT AND REGIONAL SERVICES
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Inquiry into National Road Safety

Submission:

Australia has an obligation to reflect current policies that encourage walking and cycling, in particular in urban areas, but including suburban and ex-urban areas where both walking and cycling are highly useful modes of transport (eg in rural areas to access school bus routes on main roads).

Current procedures for setting speed limits pay little if any attention to the suitability of the road and street network for people of all ages and abilities, walking or cycling. This "definition" includes people with temporary, permanent and natural mobility disabilities. Examples include young people, those injured, ill, under drugs, as well as the elderly. To not take into account these road users is discriminatory. It is also dangerous.

While Australia boasts a road "safety" record, in fact most road safety education promotes the fact that the streets and roads are dangerous. A number of examples can be provided but perhaps a telling example is the FORS campaign "Crossing the road is dangerous too". Roads in urban areas where people walking and cycling are "ubiquitous" to quote Dr Ray Brindle (CR33, 1984), should not be "dangerous" and especially not to those, the young and the elderly, who increasingly rely on car transport because the roads are so dangerous. The very limited use of walking and cycling confirms that the roads are indeed dangerous. Road authorities know this and frequently refuse to even sign the likely presence of cyclists or pedestrians given a concern that such signs may be taken as endorsing these modes and may lead to an increase in these modes and hence exposure.

Urban speed limits should be set from a low "safe" limit that is safe for pedestrians using the Pedestrian Council of Australia definition. Speed limits can then be determined by audit based on specific characteristics of the specific road environment that can be designed or adapted accordingly. The speed limit setting process should take into account the absence or presence of suitable footpaths and pedestrian and cyclist crossings and space for cyclists on the road either in a "share the road" environment or in high quality "safe" bike lanes (BFA 1996 at www.yeatesit.biz/transfiles/bfaurbanspeedlimits.pdf).

The recognised "safe" speed limit for pedestrians is 30km/h although in the current situation in Australia, 40km/h may be suitable in many street and road environments due to the design of the road environment. At speeds of 40 and above, the likelihood of a fatal crash involving pedestrians and cyclists increases exponentially, especially for young children and the elderly. Thus the current 60km/h (main roads) and 50km/h (local streets) speed limits are a major disincentive that acts strongly to discourage walking and cycling, an issue which the recent NRSS failed to address despite a number of policy initiatives including the National Cycling Strategy etc.

For areas where cyclists and pedestrians are likely, Australia should adopt the PEDESTRIAN PRIORITY system using signs that can then be used in combination with the appropriate speed limit for the road environment eg school zones and shopping streets. This would allow the rather confusing 10km/h SHARED ZONE sign to be prohibited, especially now that it is being used in conjunction with "GIVE WAY TO PEDESTRIANS", a combination which is confusing if not contradictory as well as legally suspect.

For urban main roads with cyclists using the road and with frequent pedestrian crossings, the recognised "safe" speed limit is 50km/h. No other comparable socio-economic country has 60km/h. It is nearly 10 years since the adoption of a default 50km/h to replace the 60km/h which replaced the original 30mph (50km/h) was nearly approved by the nation's transport and road safety ministers. As McLean and others have argued, several thousand pedestrians and many cyclists and motorists have died as a result of the adoption of 60km/h.

The current basis of setting speed limits (85% compliance) is flawed and biased. It allows if not encourages motorists to breach the law. No other comparable law is determined by 15% of the population being "allowed" to disobey the law. As road design requires a margin for safety, roads are designed for speeds higher than the posted speed limit. Therefore, from a road environment behavioural response perspective, it is inevitable that the speed limit will be exceeded. This is further "encouraged" by requiring that enforcement provide a significant margin of error that also allows if not encourages motorists to exceed the speed limit. These "margins" should be eliminated, such that motorists are faced with a zero tolerance enforcement regime, understood to be under consideration in Victoria, but apparently still opposed by all other state and the national road safety authorities.

Urban road safety should be assessed by a measure of "safety+convenience" (Yeates,2000) that combines the number of fatalities and injuries, the priority given the different modes and the number of pedestrians and cyclists actually using the specific location such that exposure is assessed. If a road or street feels safe, numbers of people of all ages and abilities using the road or street should increase over time in response to transport policy and promotions without an increase in fatalities, serious or long term disability injuries. Minor injuries may well increase as a result of increased exposure but these should be regarded as normal and expected risks albeit increased prevalence may indicate a higher risk of more serious injuries or fatalities and suggest "spot" interventions. Currently, so few people walk or cycle that the current roads appear safe due to a gross under-exposure compared with those countries with safer road networks and greater use of walking and cycling modes, including to public transport.

Similar principles apply to rural roads where people are discouraged from walking or cycling by speed limits that pay no attention to the conditions needed, for example for children walking or cycling to school, or for the potentially lucrative, but currently very constrained cycling tourism industry.

In summary.

The urban speed limit should be assessed from a notional "safe" limit of 40km/h and in dense urban areas, 30km/h or less. The "default" limit is a matter of balancing the cost of a signing protocol. The selected "default" speed limit has no direct effect on the actual speed limit as the Austrian city of Graz and many other European cities and towns have shown. Some states in the USA have a default limit of 25mph (40km/h). The crucial issue is consistency of application, whether the "default" limit is 30, 40 or 50km/h.

Speed limits higher (or lower) than the "default" should be signed after the speed limit has been determined by audit, not by the speed that motorists choose.

The concept of PEDESTRIAN PRIORITY zones with speed limits set for the road environment should be adopted to allow speed limits to be set that "fit" the road environment and adjoining uses.

Road "safety" and speed limits should be set to reduce fatalities and serious and long term disability injuries while increasing the number of people walking and cycling. This is not only a powerful incentive to encourage slower speeds. Increased presence of people walking and cycling will encourage better motorist compliance. Compliance per se, is irrelevant to the "safety" of pedestrians and cyclists, and arguably, reliance on 85% compliance simply legitimates higher speed and therefore higher speed limits. The higher speed and speed limits is unlikely to encourage more walking or cycling, including in particular, the local trips of up to 2-3km which even young children are quite capable of enjoying in a safe environment.

A number of demonstration "Safe Routes to School" where the goal is to substantially increase walking and cycling and decrease reliance on cars should be a very high priority, supported by a detailed before and after and ongoing evaluation.

Projects such as the 40km/h protocol in Unley in Adelaide, South Australia should be supported, funded, and promoted on safety and mode share performance rather than criticised by road authorities that still regard compliance as more important than mode shift and safety.

A means for promoting "innovative" projects that can utilise best practice should be implemented as a matter of urgency in order to develop and promote solutions that can, after evaluation in terms of safety and mode shift, be implemented elsewhere. Current "old" traffic engineering practices continue to inculcate a pro-motorist road environment that places those using the preferred modes in various combinations, at greater risk and reduced convenience and priority.

The above submission relies on numerous references and resources, many of which should be familiar to experts in this field. Should references be of benefit, please contact the author.

It is pleasing that this review should be undertaken as it is clear that the "good" policies that aim to promote walking and cycling and disabled access equality are seriously constrained if not rendered unachievable by current "old" forms of road management and road (un)safety promotion.

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