



**Response by Bushwalking Australia Inc
to the
“National Road Safety Strategy”
February 2011**

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Preamble

Bushwalking Australia is the peak body for recreational walking in Australia. Through our network of state walking federations, local clubs and individual walkers, we directly represent active and committed walkers in every state and territory.

While bushwalking and bushwalking clubs are primarily interested in walking on trails in natural areas, our members live in and are drawn from urban and rural environments. Increasingly as our membership evolves, our clubs and members are focusing on our own backyard and in rediscovering the environment in which we live. We believe that walking as “a natural pace in a natural place” is the one activity that can help us do that.

Bushwalking Australia is keen to see established a broad-based coalition of people and organizations interested in making Australia a place where people can and do walk freely and safely to enjoy the natural and man-made beauty that is our national heritage.

In the absence of a single body to represent all walkers, we offer these comments. They are inspired by and should be read in conjunction with our vision statement “*Towards a Walkable Australia*”, available on our website www.BushwalkingAustralia.org.

Types of Walker

There are many reasons why people do or don't walk, and many ways to classify walkers.

Recreational walkers (who can choose when and where they walk) are likely to avoid being on the road network. Walkers literally vote with their feet, and most recreational walkers would prefer to be on a trail or in the bush rather than under the noise and threat of motor traffic. Recreational walkers are sometimes referred to as bushwalkers, because of a preference for walking in natural areas.

Non-recreational walking includes people who walk for transport or some other purpose besides enjoyment or exercise. Distances are typically shorter than for recreational walking, and are more likely to involve other traffic.

It is sometimes assumed that recreational and other types of walking are different activities, carried out by mutually exclusive groups of people. The reality is that they are a continuous spectrum of people who are prepared to invest their valuable time in walking, but will only do so if they gain a quality experience for their efforts. If as a society we do not put the effort into making towns and cities attractive and efficient places to walk, then only the people who walk will be those who have no other choice.



It has been noted that children, the aged, and people under the influence of alcohol comprise a disproportionately large number of pedestrian accidents. Attention to the special characteristics and needs of these groups will reduce the pedestrian road toll. Nevertheless, the safety of these groups as well as mature able-bodied walkers will be improved by attention to the needs of all pedestrians.

Comments on the Strategy

The strategy offers a number of insightful observations and positive recommendations, most of which our members (who are also motorists and cyclists as well as walkers) would welcome.

Our main criticism is that insufficient attention is given to walking safety and amenity. We explore these deficiencies in the following sections.

Marginalisation of Walking in the Strategy

Although pedestrians comprise a significant proportion of the road toll (13 % of fatalities and 9% of serious injuries) there is **no attempt in the strategy to deal with walkers as a class of road user or their specific needs**. Pedestrians are only considered when measures designed for other road users (such as speed) have an impact on walkers.

Recommendation: Add section(s) on pedestrian safety to the strategy.

This could be done by adding a fifth section on vulnerable road users to the four cornerstone issues (roads, speed, vehicles and people).

Levels of Risk and Exposure

Unlike other road users, walkers are only on the road when it can't be avoided, such as when crossing the road or where there are no footpaths. Coupled with the fact that pedestrians make up only a small proportion of the traffic (un-quantified but likely to be much less than 13%) means that the level of exposure of pedestrians to traffic is low, and therefore the risks to an individual pedestrian is unacceptably high.

The fact that we do not measure how much walking is done in the community (let alone when, where and why it is done), means that we don't know how safe or unsafe it really is compared with other forms of transport.

Recommendation: Measure the level of walking systematically as we do for other forms of transport



While walking in the road environment is riskier than it should be, walking itself is intrinsically safe and does not impose dangers on others. Encouraging walking by making it safer and more convenient would provide many social and environmental benefits.

The Strategy implicitly accepts the current level of motor vehicle use, which itself is ultimately responsible for the road toll. It should consider the road safety benefits of a move towards less car dependence.

Recommendation: Road safety policies should restrain driving and encourage walking (not vice versa)

Walking as the Neglected Primary Mode of Transport

The **failure of authorities at state and federal level** to regard walking as a legitimate and indeed the primary form of transport means that walking is also ignored for road-safety perspectives. Certainly walking does not receive the attention and funding that 13% of the road toll should demand.

In recent times, funding for cycling and walking infrastructure has been made available. However application has been sporadic and haphazard, typically as a result of political pressure. Now is the time for a more systematic approach. In the absence of better data on walking it is reasonable to use road trauma as a means of allocating resources.

Recommendation: Allocate funding for roads and road safety broadly according to the level and distribution of the road toll

There is also a tendency among road authorities to deal with pedestrians as if they were farm animals; fenced off and not allowed to wander onto the roadway. There is no recognition that walkers need to cross the road, and are annoyed when they have to walk out of their way to do so.

Many of the attempts to make roads and vehicles safe (for drivers and passengers) actually have the opposite effect on walkers. For instance, crash barriers are often installed where the footpath should be. Barriers are usually installed to stop vehicles from going over an embankment, so there is usually a steep slope outside the barrier. Often walkers have little choice but walk on the carriageway inside the barrier where they have nowhere to escape. Many barriers have sharp steel edges on the outside, so even if there is room to walk outside the barrier, it is often hazardous.

Traffic signals are usually set to prioritize motor traffic over walkers. Often walkers must wait for several cycles if they need to cross more than one arm of an intersection. Even simple mid-block crossings are set to "don't walk" by default, and walkers must



wait until their request can be slotted into traffic cycles dictated by upstream sets of traffic signals. These delays cause many pedestrians to cross against the signal out of frustration, or cause them to avoid using these crossings.

Recommendation: Critically examine all road programs and treatments (especially black spot treatments) for their impact on pedestrian safety and amenity.

Safety in Numbers

Analysis of pedestrian crash locations (in Australia and overseas) shows that they occur throughout the road network. Crashes are not overly clustered around locations with high pedestrian traffic. Road safety measures intended to benefit pedestrians, such as reduced speed zones and pedestrian activated signals, tend to be located where pedestrians are numerous, and where traffic already tends to be slower and drivers more cautious. This is known as the “safety in numbers effect”, and applies to cyclists, pedestrians and congested traffic. It means that pedestrian safety measures should be systematic and more broadly applied, rather than restricted to pedestrian “hotspots”.

The reverse of “safety in numbers” of pedestrians is actually what occurs on our roads. There are in many places so few people on foot and bicycle that motorists treat even minor roads as if they were freeways. Many drivers see no reason to keep to what they regard as ridiculously low speed limits.

Locations where walkers are uncommon or infrequent can be very risky to the people who do walk there. Often, walker numbers are depressed by an unsafe or unattractive walking environment, compounding the danger.

Recommendation: Develop policies that guarantee a basic level of safety and amenity for all walkers, whatever their number and wherever they happen to be.

Traffic Volume and Speed

The need for pedestrian safety irrespective of numbers does not mean that expensive treatments need to be uniformly applied across the country in high and low density areas. For example where there are low volumes of traffic, good sight distances and a walkable road verge, pedestrians can easily cross the road safely and unaided irrespective of the posted speed limit. Similarly where the road geometry and surface roughness keeps speeds low (say below 40 kph), motorized and pedestrian traffic can be more safely intermixed. At other locations involving heavy high speed traffic, special provision for pedestrians such as median refuges and pedestrian activated signals, should be mandated.



Recommendation: Policies to provide safety for walkers should be driven by an audit based approach, which takes account of the volume and speed of traffic, rather than by numbers of pedestrians.

Warrants

In many jurisdictions a “warrant” system is used to justify the installation of road safety devices, such as mid-block pedestrian crossings. Historically, pedestrian counts were the only criteria considered, and a location that did not attract a threshold number of pedestrians failed the warrant test.

Recommendation: Where warrants are used for pedestrian crossings they should primarily consider the volume and speed of motor traffic and the absence of safe alternative crossing points nearby. The actual number of pedestrians using the location should be secondary.

Compounding of Issues

In an attempt to unravel the issues in order to establish linkages with policies and actions, the report needs to consider the counterproductive effects that some policies might have.

An example of that is the well-intentioned move some years ago to require cyclists to wear helmets. An effect of this policy at the time was to discourage many people from cycling, and to make cycling appear to be more dangerous than it was. Subsequent research has shown that the health benefit from wearing helmets was more than offset by decreased physical activity. Moreover recent attempts in Australia to introduce public bike-share schemes have failed because of the compulsory helmet law.

Another example is “Illusion of Slowness” which is the combined effect of smooth safe roads, modern comfortable vehicles, and people’s tendency to speed. Smooth roads and modern cars that are air-conditioned and sealed from engine and outside noises and bumps tend to make people feel they are traveling slower and safer than they really are. Often trees and other obstacles on the roadside are removed in the name of safety. The result is that drivers and passengers have little connection with the outside environment and receive no visual or tactile cues of the speed they are actually traveling. This lack of stimulation probably contributes to drowsiness in drivers as well.

Recommendation: Critically review all proposed interventions to ensure they do not induce a false sense of safety, or encourage people to speed or take other risks.



Appropriate Speed

Australian road law increasingly relies on the assumption that people are “entitled” to drive at the prevailing speed limit, and to assume the road ahead is clear of obstructions. Such obstructions might include pedestrians, cyclists, animals or victims and vehicles resulting from a collision.

In general, the law does not define appropriate speed other than in terms of the posted speed limit, and factors such as “the prevailing conditions”. It does not put the onus on the driver to safely avoid fixed and slow moving obstacles. What is needed is a simple test that can be readily established as a legal principle, and that can be easily understood and communicated throughout the community.

Recommendation: Establish or reinforce the legal principle that drivers must drive at or below a speed that would enable them to stop within the distance that can be clearly seen ahead.

A suitable place for this would be in Part 3 of the Australian Road Rules. Appendix 1 of this document contains draft wording.

Summary

While the Strategy document contains important and forward-looking policies to reduce the road toll, it fails to include walking as an integral part of the road transport system. Pedestrians form a significant part of the road toll, yet increased levels of walking would have major benefits to the community, including a reduction in the road toll.

Conclusion

We believe it is time to consider walking systematically as part of the transport and road safety systems, rather than as a hard-to-reach and easy-to-ignore group on the periphery. **Walking is the solution and not the problem.**



Appendix 1

Proposed amendments to the Australian Road Rules

Re-title the heading of Part 3 to include “Speeds” as well as the more specific word “Speed-Limits”:

Part 3 Speeds and Speed-Limits

Following clause 20, insert general clause 20a as follows:

20a General

Regardless of the speed-limit applying, a driver may only drive at or less than the speed that would in the circumstances enable his or her vehicle to stop safely within the distance that can be safely and clearly seen ahead.