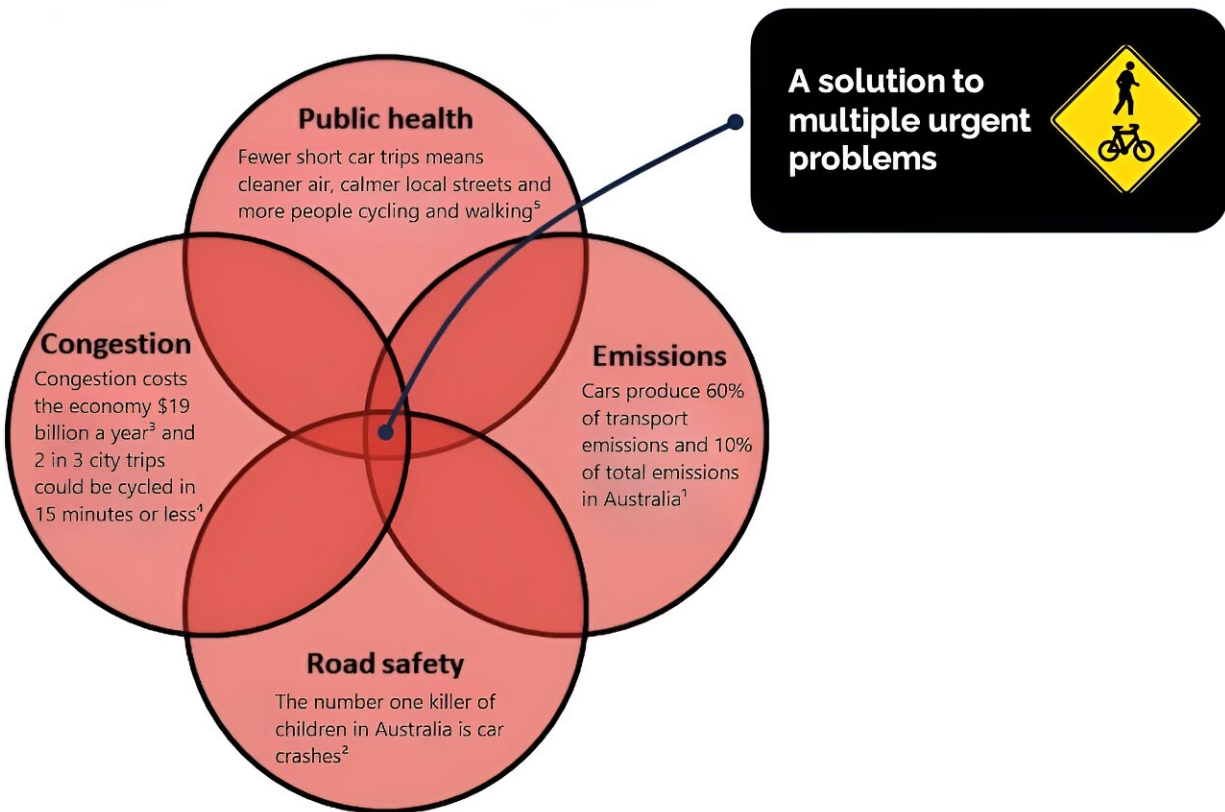


# Fewer Australians are cycling—here's how to reverse the decline

September 1 2023, by Matthew Mclaughlin and Peter McCue



How cycling and walking intersect with the issues of road safety, congestion, emissions and public health. Author supplied (data from: 1. DCEEW, 2. AIHW, 3&4. Infrastructure Australia, 5. ISPAH). Credit: The Conversation

Rates of cycling are falling in Australia, a national [report](#) released today

shows. More people started riding bikes early in the pandemic, but that hasn't lasted. The percentages of people who cycle are lower now than in 2011.

Less than one in six Australians report riding a bicycle weekly. Just over one in three have ridden in the past year.

During the time of pandemic restrictions, when there was less other traffic on the road, people perhaps felt safer to ride. Creating streets that are less busy, noisy and easier to ride on and cross safely encourages more people to cycle and walk.

Most people want to walk and ride more. [Two-thirds](#) of people want more transport funding to go into walking, [cycling](#) and public transport.

Even if you're not interested in riding a bike, you should be worried about this decline. Walking and cycling are part of the solution to several of the most pressing issues facing our cities.

## **The decline isn't surprising**

The decline in cycling probably shouldn't surprise us. In the past 40 years, the percentage of children who walk or ride to school has dropped from [75% to 25%](#).

Furthermore, cycling receives only about 2% of transport budgets. The United Nations Environment Program [recommends 20%](#) of transport funding should go to "non-motorized transport".

Most of our transport funding goes into building wider and longer roads, embedding car dependency. However, making it easier to drive leads to more driving and ultimately more congestion, an effect known as [induced demand](#). The problem even featured in [an episode](#) of the TV

show Utopia.

## **Short trips by car—everyone loses**

Most car journeys in Australian cities are [short](#). Two-thirds of these trips could be done by bike in [15 minutes or less](#).

So, for example, of the 4.2 million daily car trips in Perth, [2.8 million are less than 5km](#). In Victoria, about [half of all trips under 2km](#) are driven—that's more than 2 million a day.

These short car trips—such as the school drop-off, the short drive to the shops or the local park—are bad for public health, emissions and climate change, road safety and congestion. Walking and cycling can help solve all these problems.

## **Urban sprawl and car use have a high cost**

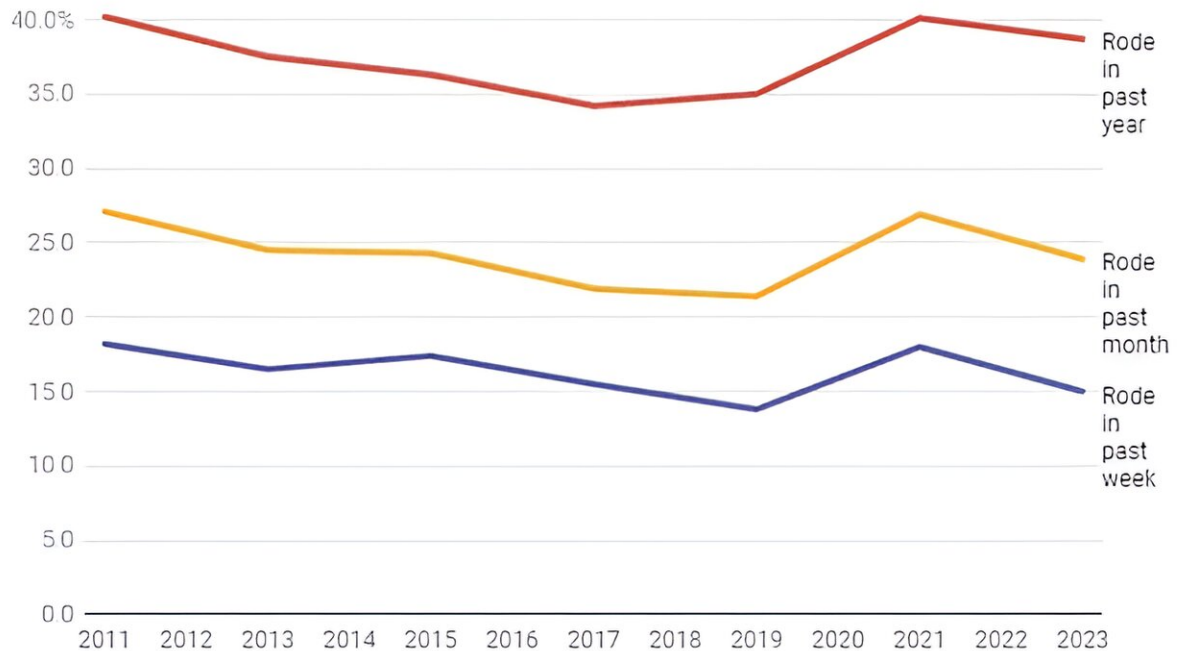
Urban sprawl makes it less appealing to walk and cycle to our destination, further entrenching car dependency.

Urban sprawl costs governments too. Last week, the New South Wales Productivity Commission [reported](#) building homes closer to the city center, rather than in outer suburbs, can save up to A\$75,000 in infrastructure costs.

The extra costs of building farther away include providing schools, roads, parks, water and wastewater infrastructure.

## **Three transport priorities**

## Rates of cycling in Australia, 2011–2023



Credit: The Conversation

For people to walk and cycle, we need to provide so-called [healthy streets](#): not too noisy, easy to cross, with clean air and where people feel safe.

In 2022, the [Asia-Pacific Society for Physical Activity](#) and cycling advocacy group [We Ride Australia](#) proposed [three transport priorities](#) for Australia supported by a national alliance of 13 public health, [transport](#), education and climate organizations.

### 1. Safer default speed limits

The current default speed limit of 50km/h in built-up areas is unsafe and

leads to many deaths and injuries each year.

Default 30km/h speed limits in built-up areas are an immediate low-cost way to increase road safety.

Other countries are showing it can be done. For example, this month [Wales](#) is set to adopt a default speed limit of 20 miles an hour (32km/h).

## 2. 1,500m school zones

Most students live [within 3km](#) of their school. That's less than a 10-minute bike ride or a 30-minute walk.

However, to boost walking and cycling to school, parents need to feel it's safe for their children to do so. The solution is to create safe walking and cycling routes with [pedestrian priority crossings](#) within 500–1,500m of schools. Streets along these routes are easy to cross and not too busy or noisy.

## 3. E-bike subsidies

Cutting carbon emissions to limit climate change and air pollution requires us to reduce private car use. Focusing [purchase incentives](#) solely on electric cars in Australia is slowing down the race to zero emissions. Indeed, research shows cycling is ten times more important than electric cars for achieving net-zero cities.

E-bikes assist the rider with pedaling, which makes them slightly faster than a regular bike. Typically e-bike users ride [greater distances](#) than regular push-bike users.

However, the upfront price of e-bikes is one of the main barriers to

buying one. Providing incentives for people to buy an e-bike would increase their uptake. Research shows a return on investment of [\\$2–\\$3](#) for every \$1 spent on these incentives.

## What else can we do?

As well as the [three transport priorities](#), we can of course take many more actions that would help increase walking and cycling. These measures include: boosting housing density, [beautifying](#) our neighborhoods, programs to build people's confidence and skills to walk and cycle, such as [beginners bike tours](#), and more frequent [public transport](#).

By prioritizing walking and cycling for short trips, Australia can reduce the national combined cost of \$67 billion a year of [traffic injuries and deaths](#), [traffic congestion](#), [air pollution](#) and [physical inactivity](#).

Here are four actions you can take to help boost walking and cycling in your area:

1. look for opportunities where you can walk, wheel or cycle short journeys
2. join a community-led coalition, such as [Better Streets](#)
3. score your local neighborhood for walkability using this [tool](#)
4. write to your local MP asking for the [three transport priorities](#) to be adopted.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Fewer Australians are cycling—here's how to reverse the decline (2023, September 1)  
retrieved 29 April 2024 from  
<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-09-australians-cyclinghere-reverse-decline.html>

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