

COVID-19's Impact on Traffic Congestion in Australia and Potential Implications for the Deployment of Autonomous Vehicles

The novel coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), which emerged in Wuhan City in the Hubei Province of China in December 2019, has since spread internationally and resulted in widespread lockdowns and travel restrictions across the world. In Australia specifically, in addition to various other measures, the government has implemented strict social distancing rules and restrictions on non-essential gatherings and persons entering the country. Principally, COVID-19 has employees around Australia working from home, where it is possible to do so. The associated reduction in individuals commuting to central business districts has given the world a brief insight into motor vehicle mobility in our cities when they are not subject to traditional levels of day-to-day traffic.

According to the latest transport data collected in Victoria by Australia's national transport research organisation, the Australian Road Research Board (ARRB), restrictions and lockdowns have had a significant effect on reducing traffic.

The data collected by ARRB's National Transport Performance Centre shows a major reduction in congestion on Melbourne's Monash Freeway of between 88% and 95% for weekday peak periods. Critically, the reduction in congestion has been obtained from comparatively minor reductions in total traffic numbers – with actual vehicle numbers only reducing by 28%. We consider this data highlights the potential boost to travel efficiency and congestion diminishment that can be obtained by relatively minor decreases in traffic.

In the event that autonomous vehicle uptake reaches a point where vehicle numbers are reduced across our roads, the ARRB's COVID-19 data may also be a glimpse of the potential efficiency benefits that can be obtained. Likewise, if these efficiency benefits are obtained through mere reduction in traffic numbers, we query what horizons will potentially open up through the use of autonomous vehicles that project to being more efficient generally, combined with a potential reduction in overall traffic.

The ARRB believes these impacts are not just limited to Victoria and will be similar in most major capital cities of Australia. Notably, the AARB's National Transport Performance Centre is utilising this data to better understand and improve Australia's mobility in preparation for life after COVID-19. Likewise, we consider that those parties connected to the development, projecting, planning and implementation of autonomous vehicle use across the globe should consider this data and how it can help us prepare for life with autonomous vehicles in the near future.

If you would like to know more about this issue and the Australian policy regime for autonomous vehicles, please contact one of our dedicated team.

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