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Committee Secretary
Senate Standing Committees on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport
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Canberra ACT 2600

Submission to Senate inquiry into Aspects of Road Safety in Australia

Dear Sir/Madam,

I am leading a three-year Australian Research Council funded project (DE120102279) called "Stressed Mobilities" that is investigating the effects of commuting in Sydney. The project is principally concerned with the relationship between commuting and wellbeing.

The project runs from 2012 until 2015. However, there are already a number of published research outputs that are of relevance to the Senate inquiry into Aspects of Road Safety in Australia.

Whilst I am contributing this submission as a researcher at the Australian National University, its contents should not be attributed to the organisation.

What follows is a brief overview of the aims and methods of the Stressed Mobilities project, followed by seven points of relevance to two of the committee's terms of reference.

Please do contact me should you require further details about the project or copies of the papers referenced.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry.

Yours faithfully,

Dr David Bissell

Submission to Senate inquiry into Aspects of Road Safety in Australia

1. Project Background

I am leading a three-year Australian Research Council funded project (DE120102279) called "Stressed Mobilities" that is investigating the effects of commuting in Sydney. The project is principally concerned with the relationship between commuting and wellbeing.

This project involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 53 stressed commuters, most of whom reside in the Greater Metropolitan Area of Sydney. The purpose of these interviews was to understand and evaluate the complexity of the issues that are implicated in these commutes. It also involved in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 25 key transport stakeholders in Sydney. The purpose of these interviews was to build up a picture of how different professional perspectives can help to understand the opportunities and challenges involved in commuting in Sydney.

In the context of this submission, these interviews demonstrate:

- how commuting introduces road safety issues that are distinctive to this sort of journey.
- how the complexities of the relationship between commuting and road safety are well captured by qualitative approaches.

2. Points of relevance from the *Stressed Mobilities* research project to the inquiry

I would like to address terms of reference d and c.

Term of reference d) The different considerations affecting road safety in urban, regional and rural areas

2.1 There are changing road safety risks at different times of day

The *Stressed Mobilities* project has found that road safety risks can change over the course of the day:

- Participants who commuted by car reported that they experience significant fatigue during their journey home.
- Many participants who reported that their job involves significant stress used their journey home to mentally sort through work-related matters, diverting attention away from road conditions.
- Shift-workers were particularly susceptible to increased fatigue on their return journeys.
- Many participants reported first-hand experiences of 'microsleeps' on their return journeys. For most, these experiences were frightening enough to adjust their daily habits to become more alert (Bissell, 2014).

2.2 The monotony of commuting can give rise to risky driving

The *Stressed Mobilities* project has discovered how, for experienced road users, the monotony of commuting along the same route every day can prompt drivers to explore new ways of making their journeys more pleasurable.

Some participants described the pleasures that they experienced from experimenting with the *limits* of their driving skills. Of relevance to issues relating to road safety, this includes driving over the speed limit, and undertaking risky maneuvers (Bissell, 2014).

2.3 The causes of 'road rage' for commuters are complex

The *Stressed Mobilities* project shows that the causes of frustration that can give rise to 'road rage' are complex.

- For some participants, the increasing pressures of work and home life can create a sense of 'time poverty'. This can make experiences of congestion feel more stressful, changing dispositions towards other road users.
- Some participants revealed that their main frustration is with what they perceive as inadequate infrastructure. Indeed, many experienced drivers remarked on their experience of the city's traffic 'getting worse' over time. This sense of frustration can change dispositions towards other road users.
- For others, the frustration is increased over time as they develop their own 'infrastructure expertise'. This is where commuter themselves can see how things could be made to work differently, for instance poorly coordinated traffic light sequences.
- For others still, experienced road users can become frustrated at what they perceive as mistakes by more novice road users.

2.4 Confidence-enhancing measures can improve safety

The *Stressed Mobilities* project has shown that confidence-enhancing strategies can help to improve road safety. There are a number of different formal and informal ways that road commuters increase their confidence:

- For cyclists, a 'bike bus' where people cycle into work together is an effective way of increasing confidence. This is particularly appropriate for people who have recently transitioned to cycling; or people whose confidence might have been reduced by an accident or confrontation.
- Many cyclists attested to the benefits of the council funded 'Cycling in the City' courses to increase their confidence.
- Just as confidence can be increased, it can also be taken away. Many road users described how particularly confronting events can decrease confidence for long periods of time. These might be significant enough to prompt a change to the mode of travel that they take to work.

2.5 Improving dispositions between different road users increases safety

The *Stressed Mobilities* project has shown that commuters' dispositions towards each other significantly affects road safety:

- For many commuters, the other vehicles that they encounter every day are not anonymous. Many road users are the same every day. Awareness of this fact can help to de-anonymize road users and foster a sense of respect and responsibility.
- Sydney's Cycling in the City course teaches 'gracious cycling'. This is about fostering a more respectful relationship between drivers and cyclists.
- Troublingly, some participants voiced a perception that the views of particular media 'shock jocks' are increasing drivers' aggression towards cyclists.
- Whilst all cyclists who participated in the project welcomed investment in cycling infrastructures, some participants felt that bike paths can marginalize cyclists in a way that removes opportunities for drivers to develop awareness of cyclists.

2.6 Changing skills present distinct safety challenges

The *Stressed Mobilities* project has shown that commuting involves a finely-tuned set of expertise that can take time to develop (Bissell, 2015). This expertise comprises a range of advanced skills such as navigation, timing and coordination, control of vehicles or bikes, and non-verbal communication with other commuters. Owing to different levels of experience, novice and experienced commuters face very different road safety challenges:

- For novice road commuters, this is about learning the formal legal and informal social codes of road etiquette in order to travel safely.
- For more experienced road commuters, this is about maintaining safety-awareness when the commute becomes 'second-nature'.

c. The impact of new technologies and advancements in understanding of vehicle design and road safety

2.7 Smart infrastructures can play a role in reducing commuting frustration

Smart infrastructures can play a key part in reducing the frustrations experienced by road users. Participants in the *Stressed Mobilities* project described how time 'indicator boards' are an effective way of warning commuters about delays which can reduce stressful experiences of unpredictability.

3. References

Bissell, D. (2015) 'Transitioning comforts: organising encounters for urban commuting mobilities' in Price, L., McNally, D. and Crang, P. (eds.) *The Geographies of Comfort*. Ashgate, Aldershot. (forthcoming).

Bissell, D. (2014) 'Transforming commuting mobilities: the memory of practice', *Environment and Planning A,* 46(8), 1946-1965.

Dr David Bissell is Senior Lecturer and an ARC DECRA award holder in the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. As a mobilities researcher, his research examines how different forms of mobility give rise to new relations between people and place. His research is published in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space; Environment and Planning A; Cultural Geographies; Mobilities; Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers; Social and Cultural Geography; Area; Theory and Event; Geoforum; Geographical Research; Journal of Transport Geography; Space and Culture; and M/C Journal.* He is co-editor of the *Routledge Handbook of Mobilities* (2014) and *Stillness in a Mobile World* (2011). He is on the editorial boards of *Mobilities* and *Australian Humanities Review.*