

Traffic congestion in Melbourne has been a source of scrutiny. Even though working from home is becoming a more popular practice, the traffic is getting closer to the same level it was at before the Covid-19 pandemic took effect in early 2020.

Data published by road operator company [Transurban](#) shows the traffic in Melbourne is only six per cent below pre-pandemic levels. There were [873, 000 daily transactions](#) on Citylink before the pandemic. By last December, they had jumped up to [818, 000 from the lockdown lows of 355, 000](#).

According to [VicRoads](#), traffic on major roads since schools re-opened at the end of January has averaged 94 per cent of 2019 levels on Monday and 95 per cent between Tuesday and Friday. Rush hour speed has only been three per cent faster during this period.

Lesley Birch, a Coburg resident, has found that the re-opening of schools has caused the journey from her home to her workplace in Footscray to take an extra 25 minutes.

“With school holidays it takes me 20 to 25 minutes to drive to the car park,” Lesley said. “But when it’s not school holidays it’s 45 minutes and if there’s an accident somewhere and everyone’s trying to drive different routes, it could be an hour.”

These traffic delays have been “adding stress” to Lesley’s worklife. “Dealing with the traffic has added an extra hour to my workday in that I have to leave the house at eight to make sure I am at the desk by nine,” she says. “It takes extra time that feels like worktime because you’re doing that commute.”

As well as the re-opening of schools, road closures have been contributing to traffic congestion. Over the past year, closures have been taking place on the Tullamarine Freeway for reasons such as [collisions](#) and [mud spills](#). On top of that, [there has been a closure of four out of five lanes on the West Gate Freeway for bridge maintenance](#).

Lesley says her colleagues have been experiencing these sorts of problems. “I have two team members who work for me and I often get a text message from Katie saying ‘Oh sorry I’m stuck in traffic’ because she’s coming from Williamstown and something’s happened with the West Gate tunnel and there’s roads that are blocked or diverted,” she says.

Lesley’s struggles with the traffic have led to her decision to “work two days in the office and three days at home”. She has found that remote work releases the stress of dealing with traffic every day.

“You get more out of you if you work at home because I’ll keep working for an extra half hour because at least I’m not in the car driving home, whereas if I’m at work I hate it if I have to stay back to do something,” according to Lesley.

Lesley has noticed that her daily life has become more balanced since she resorted to remote work. “It’s the traffic but it’s also the flexibility of working at home because if I needed to go to the shop I can nick out and it only takes 15 minutes,” she says.

Lesley’s sentiments about remote work are gaining popularity in Melbourne. [According to a 2022 report](#) published by the Australian Transport Research Forum, increases in working from home once the COVID-19 pandemic is over match reductions in commuting. Working from home is projected to increase by five per cent in inner Melbourne and two per cent in both middle and outer Melbourne. There is expected to be commuting declines in all areas of Melbourne, especially inner Melbourne (-12.4 per cent).

But there is scepticism as to whether remote work will be effective in mitigating traffic congestion. Liam Davies, PhD Candidate in the Centre for Urban Research at RMIT University, says it “frees up time in messy ways”.

“People who work from home might not travel to work during morning peak hour but they might travel more in the evening or on the weekends,” according to Mr Davies.

In addition to working from home, there have been attempts at addressing traffic congestion on a political level. An example is the [Grattan Institute’s proposal of a congestion tax](#). Under this proposal, Victorian drivers would be charged \$10 a day to drive into Melbourne’s CBD. There is hope that the tax would take five thousand cars off the road during the morning and afternoon peak and increase speed by 16 per cent in the CBD.

The tax is “appealing” but would fail to reduce traffic in Melbourne’s outer suburbs, according to Mr Davies.

“We also have congestion in Ringwood, Broadmeadows, Sunshine, Preston, Dandenong and a congestion charge wouldn’t affect those,” he says. “I’m also not sure if the public and active transport networks are ready in those outer areas to take on a large amount of people.”

There has also been an incentive to invest more in public transport to limit the use of cars. Train stations, tram stops and bus stops in Victoria are expected to be upgraded through a [\\$157 million package of works](#) included in the latest Victorian budget.

More investment in rail projects as well as the construction of trams and the revitalisation of the bus fleet should be considered “really positive”, according to Mr Davies.

But Mr Davies believes that there should be less money spent on freeway projects moving forward. “I’m particularly concerned about the West Gate Tunnel Project, and my fear with that is it will help more cars drive into the central city,” he says.

So investment in traffic solutions is “important” but “it is equally important where that investment is made” given that spending money “won’t always deliver good results”, according to Mr Davies.