



Bust the boozers

Boost random breath testing to save lives.

Road Safety Series
November 2023



Acknowledging our Traditional Owners

We acknowledge the land on which we gather, from places as widespread and diverse as the NRMA. In the presence of Elders past, present and future, we recognise all journeys and our mutual role in creating new paths together.

About the NRMA

The NRMA represents over 2.9 million Australians mostly in NSW and the ACT, making it one of the largest tourism and transport companies in Australia. We provide motoring, transport and tourism services to our members and the community.

We have focused on better transport infrastructure since the beginning, when our founders lobbied for improvements to Sydney's Parramatta Road back in 1920. Independent advocacy is the foundation activity of our organisation, and remains critical to who we are today.

Road Safety Series

The NRMA has prepared a series of reports with the aim of identifying the main factors involved in road crashes and initiatives that may help to reduce the risk of loss of life and injuries.

Continued investment in enforcement, road infrastructure, vehicle technology and public education campaigns are needed to improve the safety of all road users.



Introduction

More than four decades ago, Random Breath Testing (RBT) was introduced in NSW to combat drink driving. In 1982, drivers were required to blow through a clear tube, anxiously hoping that the crystals would not turn green to indicate they were over the limit. Despite advancements in breath testing technology, the battle against drink driving persists.

The NRMA has led the charge in tackling drink driving. The organisation launched the first ever drink driving education campaign in the 1980s, setting the standard for future campaigns.¹

History has shown that drivers still need to perceive that there is a high risk of getting caught. RBTs provide the heightened awareness of the likelihood of getting caught. In NSW, over 3.8 million RBTs were conducted during 2022 – this is less than half of what is required under the Austroads best practice model. RBT levels are down 36 per cent from 2019.

If we can stop people from drink driving we can save lives but to achieve this a dramatic escalation of RBTs is needed. All jurisdictions should adopt the Austroads best practice model of at least 1.1 tests per year, per licence on issue. This equates to more than 7.5 million roadside tests annually across NSW and the ACT.

Not only are RBTs important to deter people from drink driving but the majority of best practice drink driving countermeasures rely on drink drivers getting caught. People will continue to lose their lives due to drink driving unless the dramatic escalation of RBTs occurs and important messaging around the risk is reinforced.

Implementing the Austroads best practice model increases police presence and supports creating a network-wide effect to deter drink driving from occurring. RBTs conducted 'anytime, anywhere' across the road network act to stamp out drink driving from the very outset.

What the NRMA wants

1. At least 1.1 random breath tests per year, per licence on issue to be conducted.
2. Adequate planning and resourcing to ensure a long-term goal of at least 1.5 random breath tests per year per licence on issue is achievable.
3. Appropriate funding and resourcing allocated to police in order to achieve at least 1.1 random breath tests annually.

More cops, more resources

Road safety police enforcement is very different from what it was 40 years ago when RBTs were introduced. Across Australia, automated enforcement technology is now used to tackle speeding, red-light running, illegal mobile phone use, seatbelt non-use and unregistered driving. Drink driving detection however, cannot yet be automated.

RBTs are labour intensive yet very effective. In 2020-21, \$23.1 million from the NSW Community Road Safety Fund was spent on the Police Enhanced Enforcement Program², which includes the breath testing program. This pales in comparison to the \$42 million spent on automated enforcement (Speed Camera Program and Mobile Phone Detection Program).

Appropriate funding and resources for police are needed to ensure that at least 1.1 RBTs annually can be achieved. This includes a focus on more Highway Patrol Officers, particularly in regional communities. RBTs should not be the poor cousin to automated enforcement given the benefits associated with high visibility policing.

Drink driving trauma

An average of 52 lives have been lost annually over the last five years due to road crashes involving alcohol, which is 17 percent of all fatalities on NSW roads.³

As of 31 August 2023, preliminary data shows that 35 lives have been lost so far due to alcohol-related crashes.³

People will continue to lose their lives due to drink driving unless the dramatic escalation of RBTs occurs and important messaging around the risk is reinforced.

36 **42**

In 2022, 36 people lost their lives in alcohol-related crashes.³

In 2022, NSW Police proceeded against a daily average of 42 persons for drink driving.⁴

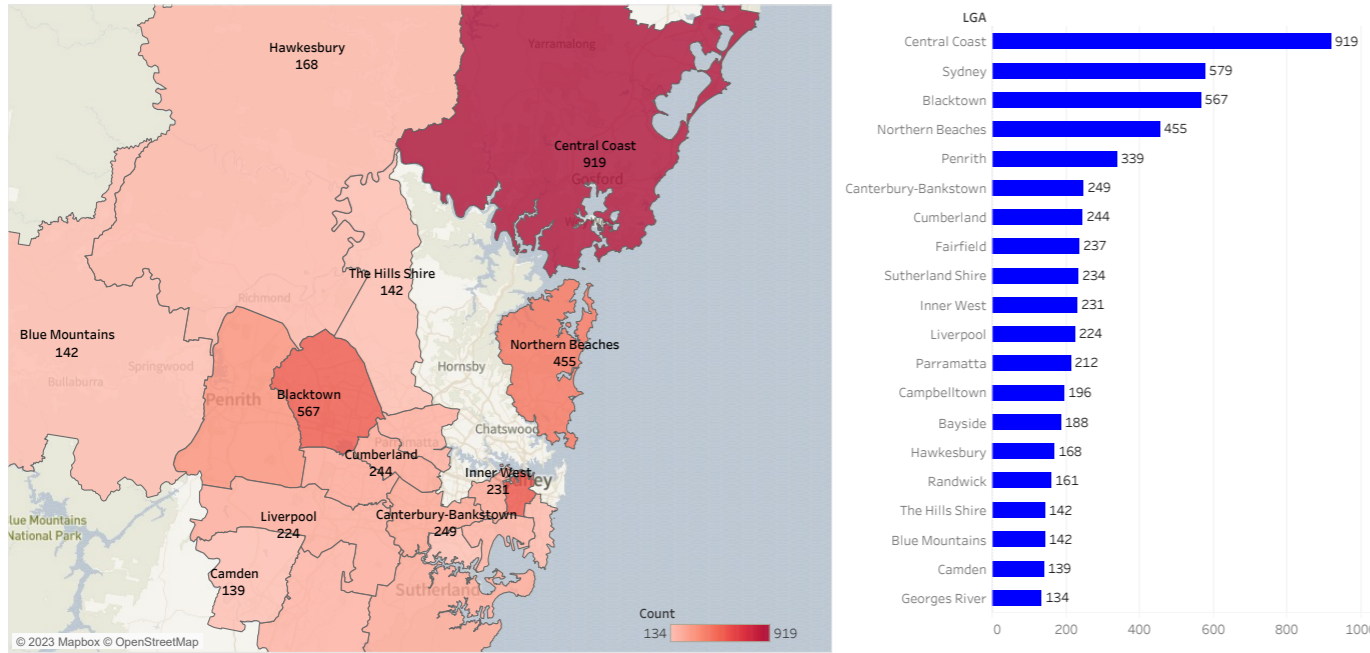
72% **278**

72% of alcohol-related fatalities were on country roads.³

In 2022, 278 people were seriously injured in alcohol-related crashes.³

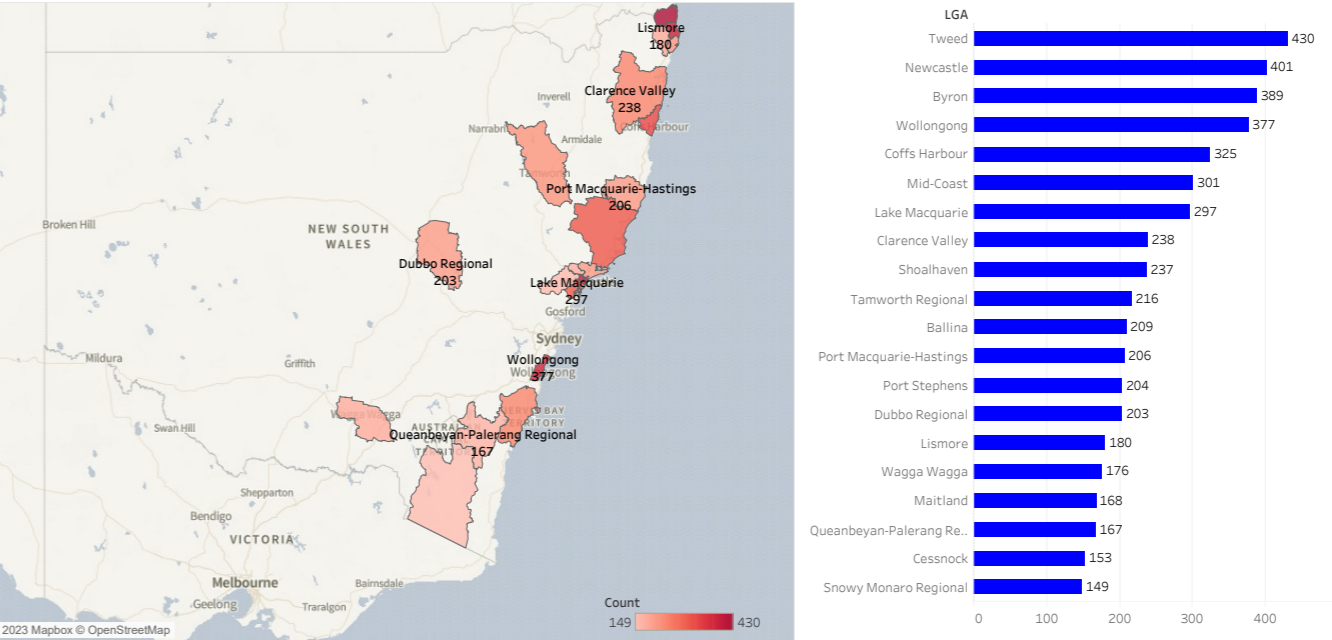
NSW Police conducted 3,825,522 random breath tests in 2022 – down 36 per cent on 2019.⁷

Figure 1. Drink driving top 20 Greater Sydney LGA by number of incidents.



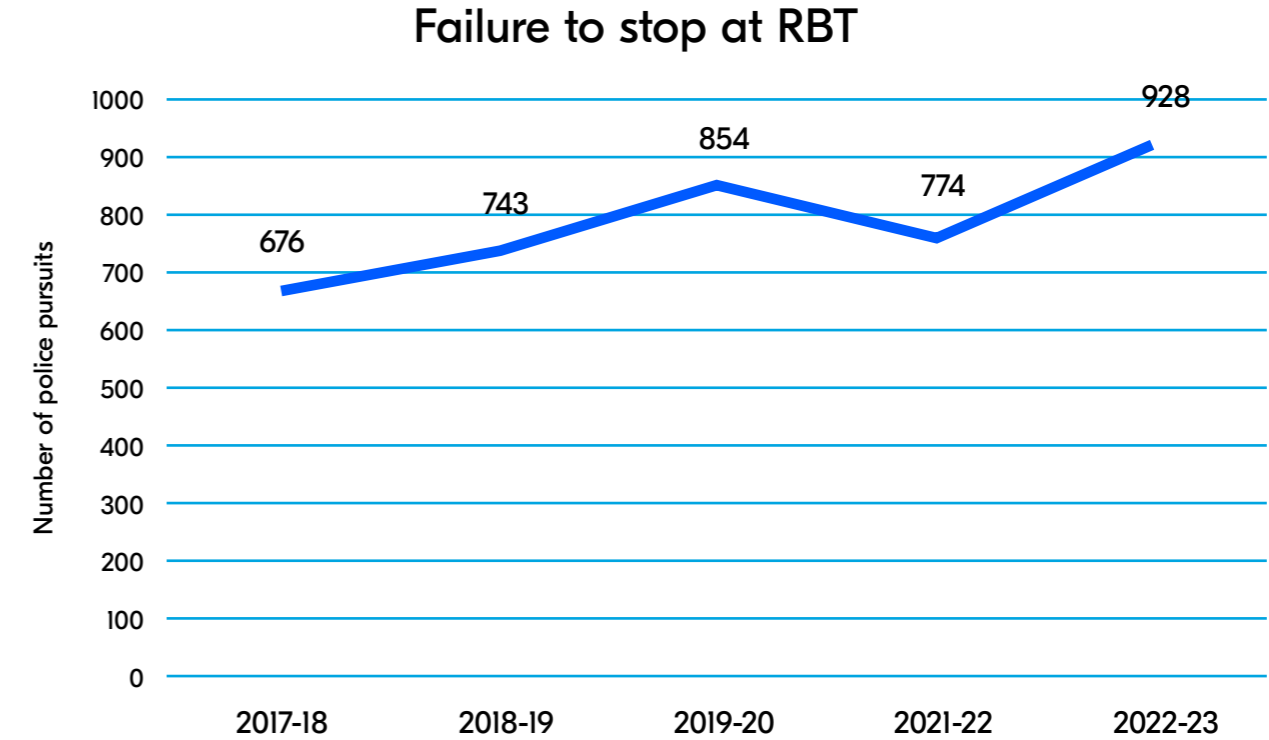
Source: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research

Figure 2. Top 20 regional NSW local government areas by number of drink driving incidents in 2022.



Source: NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research

Figure 3. Number of NSW Police pursuits undertaken for failure to stop at an RBT.



Source: NSW Police Force Annual Report 2021-22

What NRMA members are saying

During August 2023, we surveyed over 3,300 NRMA members about drink driving and RBTs.⁵

Top road safety issues

1. Speeding (59%)
2. Driving under the influence of alcohol (58%)
3. Speaking or texting on a mobile phone while holding it (55%)
4. Aggressive driving (50%)
5. Driving under the influence of drugs (48%)

Members rank drink driving as their second biggest road safety concern.

Drink drivers

12% of people who drink alcohol have driven when they were over the limit.

17% of people who drink alcohol have possibly driven when they were over the limit.

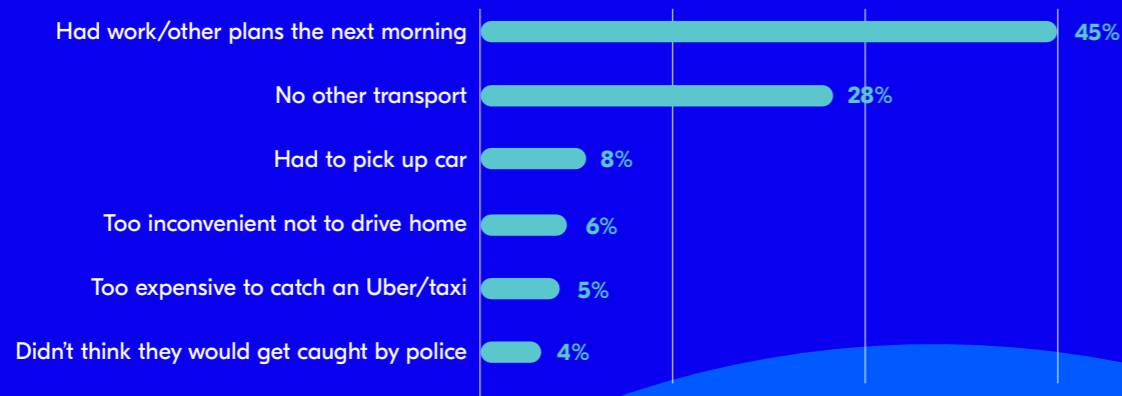
Drink driving the next day



Of those who drank alcohol, almost one in three believe they could have been over the limit the next day. Of these,

11% of people who drank alcohol still drove the next morning when they thought they were over the limit.

Figure 4. Reasons for drink driving the next day.



Getting caught

Of the people who admitted to drink driving or thought they may have,

14% have previously been caught drink driving.

26% think it's highly unlikely or somewhat unlikely to get caught driving over the legal limit.

17% think it's highly unlikely to get caught driving over the legal limit in rural areas.

Seen an RBT

45% have seen an RBT in the last 6 months.

23% have seen an RBT in the last 7 to 12 months.

Almost half of members say there are regular locations for RBTs set up in their neighbourhood.

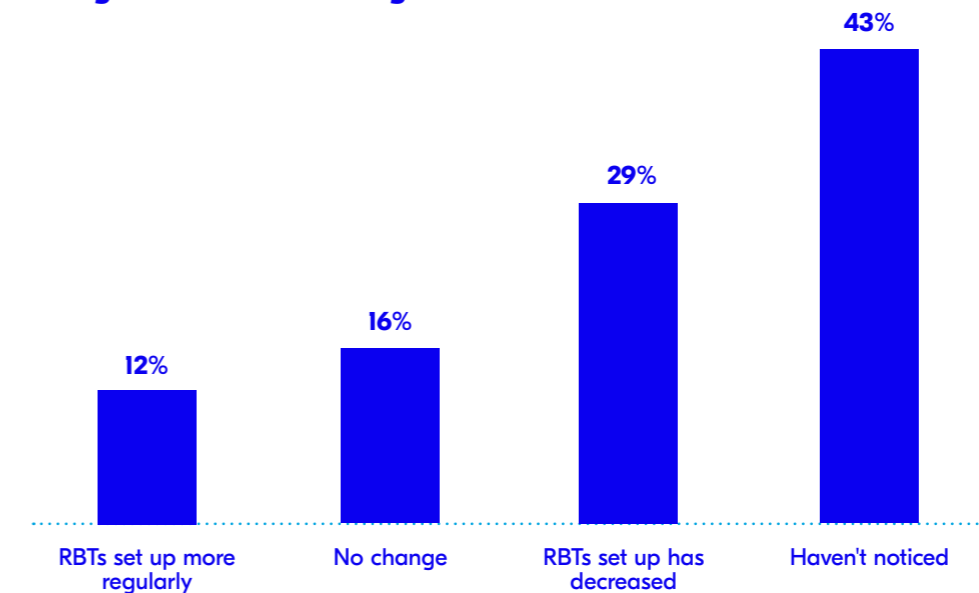
Stopped by an RBT

21% have been stopped by an RBT in the last 6 months.

18% have been stopped by an RBT in the last 7 to 12 months.

23% did not report having seen or being stopped by an RBT in the last 12 months.

Figure 5. Change in the amount of times RBTs has been set up at regular locations in neighbourhood.



Pulled over

Drink driving is one of the top three causes of fatalities and serious injuries on NSW roads, with alcohol a factor in 17 per cent of fatalities.⁶

Random Breath Testing (RBT) is not the only solution to combat drink driving but it is a crucial one. In order to deter people from drink driving, they need to perceive that there is a high risk of getting caught. RBTs have been instrumental in drastically reducing the number of alcohol-related fatalities over the last 40 years since being introduced in 1982.

Not only are RBTs important to deter people from drink driving but the majority of best practice drink driving countermeasures rely on drink drivers getting caught. These countermeasures include mandatory alcohol interlocks, harsh penalties including vehicle sanctions and drink driver offender programs.

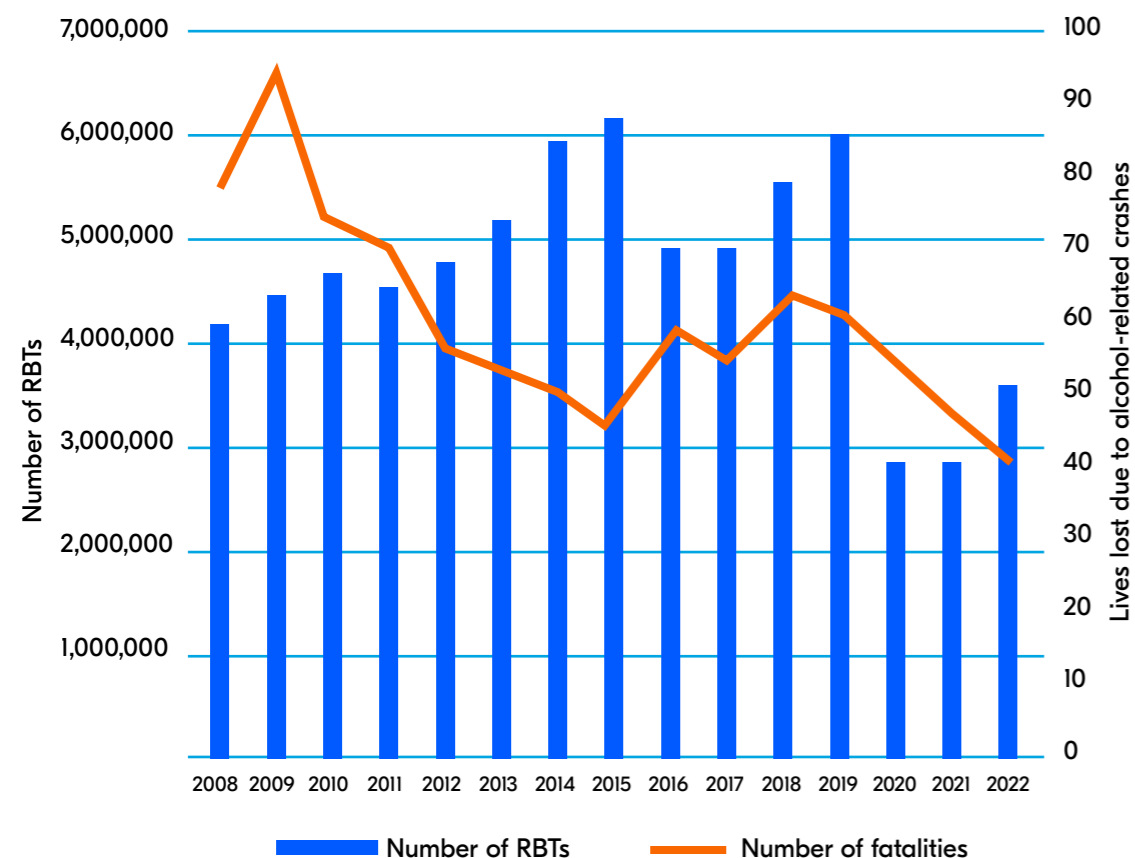
In NSW, over 3.8 million RBTs were conducted during 2022 as shown in Figure 6, 3.5 million short of what is required

under the Austroads best practice model. RBT levels are down 36 percent from 2019.⁷ It is also concerning that over a quarter of NRMA members surveyed believed it was highly unlikely or somewhat unlikely that they would get caught drink driving.⁵

According to Austroads (2020), if the level of breath testing is decreased, there is a probability that both the incidence of drink driving and road crashes will rise. In 2022, 36 people lost their lives and 278 were seriously injured in alcohol-related crashes on NSW roads.

The road toll in 2023 is currently tracking at over 60 more lives lost compared to the same time last year. As of 31 August 2023, preliminary data also shows that tragically 35 lives have been lost so far due to alcohol-related crashes. Importantly, NSW still has a long way to go to halve the number of fatalities and reduce serious injuries by 30 per cent by 2030.

Figure 6. Number of NSW Random Breath Tests and alcohol-related fatalities.



New Zealand's escalating drink driving problem

Tragically, New Zealand has experienced a more than twofold increase in the number of fatalities due to drink driving since 2013.

In 2022, 111 people lost their lives on New Zealand roads due to a crash with someone above the alcohol limit, compared to 53 lives lost in 2013.⁹ The upward trajectory of fatalities coincides with the decrease in the number of RBTs.

The New Zealand Automobile Association (AA) has been campaigning for many years for an increase in the number of RBTs conducted. New Zealand has an annual target of three million breath tests that New Zealand Police have acknowledged is not currently being met.¹⁰ According to the AA, testing numbers have not reached target levels since 2014. However, testing numbers for 2023 to date are trending up and may be over two million for the first time in years.

With an RBT rate of 0.51 tests per licence on issue per year, sadly, the increase in the number of lives lost on New Zealand roads comes as no surprise.

'It is also concerning that over a quarter of NRMA members surveyed believed it was highly unlikely or somewhat unlikely that they would get caught drink driving.'

No target yet

Disappointingly, there is no target number of breath tests that must be conducted in NSW. Without a target to strive for and to be measured against, it is easy for breath tests to fall by the wayside.

The NSW Drug and Alcohol Road Safety Advisory Group established in 2022 as an action from the 2026 Road Safety Action Plan and was tasked to address this shortfall. One of the Advisory Group's objectives is to 'recommend ways to achieve greater efficiency, enforcement levels (including target number of drug and breath tests), and deterrence of drink and drug driving across the state'.⁶

Breath testing across Australia

Breath testing rates vary across Australia and levels have dramatically decreased since pre-COVID. In 2022, NSW Police conducted over 3.8 million RBTs with a positive return rate of 0.41 per cent. This represented a fall of over 2.1 million tests compared to 2019 figures. In Queensland, over 1.6 million RBTs were conducted compared to nearly 2.7 million tests in 2019.⁷

According to Austroads, Australian jurisdictions should be conducting at least 1.1 RBTs per year, per licence on issue, and should be aiming for a longer term goal of at least 1.5 tests per year, per licence on issue.¹¹

The NRMA conducted analysis to determine RBT rates across Australian jurisdictions. As shown in Table 1, breath testing rates range from just 0.10 tests per licence, on issue, per year (ACT) to 0.89 in Western Australia. The rate in NSW has decreased from 0.96 tests in 2019 to 0.57 in 2022 (see Figure 7).

It is also evident that jurisdictions that have a greater detection rate such as the ACT (1 in 42 tests) are conducting specific targeted testing, for example testing near licenced premises (e.g. pubs) rather than general deterrence testing.

In NSW, over 7.3 million RBTs need to be conducted per year to achieve at least 1.1 RBTs per licence holder as indicated in Table 2. Almost a quarter of NRMA members surveyed did not report having seen or stopped by an RBT in NSW the last 12 months; something has to change.

Table 1. Drink driving enforcement levels across Australia.¹²

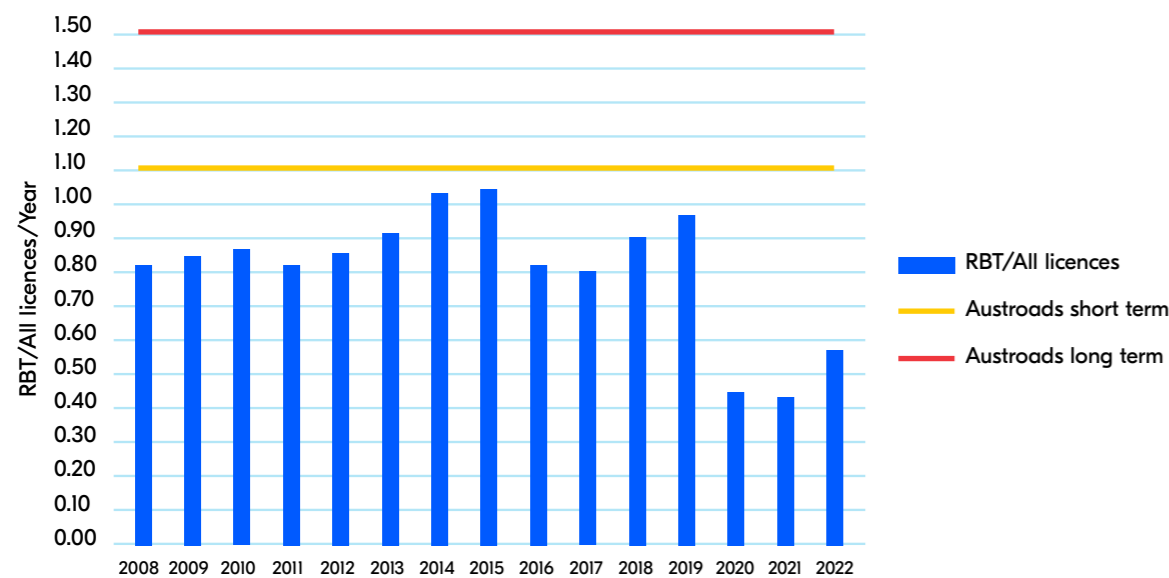
Enforcement	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT
No. of RBTs in 2022	3,825,522	2,203,908	1,657,920	554,774	2,179,499	150,393	65,819	35,591
Percentage of positive tests in 2022	0.41%	0.38%	1.03%	0.82%	0.34%	1.14%	8.34%	2.38%
RBT per year, per licence on issue	0.57	0.47	0.35	0.42	0.89	0.31	0.41	0.10
Rate of detection	1 in 242 tests	1 in 266 tests	1 in 97 tests	1 in 122 tests	1 in 297 tests	1 in 88 tests	1 in 12 tests	1 in 42 tests

Table 2. Number of RBTs that need to be conducted in NSW to achieve Austroads recommended RBT rates.

Austroads recommended RBT rates	NSW Number of RBTs needed per year*	ACT Number of RBTs needed per year*
Short term	7,359,757	376,431
Long term	10,036,032	513,315

*Based on 2022 NSW licence numbers.

Figure 7. Number of RBTs conducted in NSW per year, per licence on issue compared to Austroads short and long term recommend RBT rates.



Drink driving in country areas

Last year, 27 people lost their lives and 158 people were seriously injured due to alcohol-related crashes on country roads.⁸ The ripple effect these road crashes have on rural communities is immeasurable.

The propensity to drink and drive in rural areas is far greater compared to urban areas due to geographical, social and environmental factors. Rural areas often have limited alternative transport options connecting hospitality establishments, transport hubs and local residences. Coupled with the perception of a lower detection rate, this leads to a great number of motorists driving drunk.



References

¹ Broomhan, R. (1996). *On the road: The NRMA's first seventy-five years*. Sydney, NSW.

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⁵ NRMA. (2023). *Drink driving and random breath testing market research survey*. Sydney, NRMA.

⁶ Transport for NSW. (2022). [2026 Road Safety Action Plan: Towards zero trauma on NSW roads](#). Available online.

⁷ Bureau of Infrastructure and Transport Research Economics. (2023). [Enforcement data dashboard](#). Available online.

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¹¹ Austroads. (2020). *Effectiveness of drink driving countermeasures: National policy framework*. Publication No. AP-R613-20.

¹² Personal communication. (2023). Licence data sourced from relevant road transport authorities. RBT data sourced from relevant police jurisdictions and Bureau of Infrastructure and Transport Research Economics' [enforcement data dashboard](#).

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