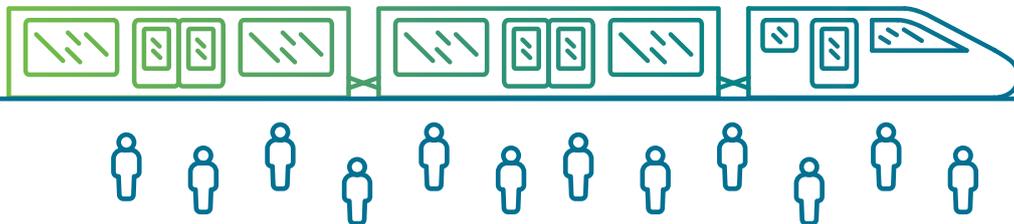


# MEMBER BRIEFING: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON PASSENGER RAIL IN AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND



COVID-19 restrictions decimated public transport use in 2020, reducing passenger numbers by more than 90 per cent on some networks at the height of the pandemic.

While many have returned to public transport since the historic lows of earlier this year, the data reveals it may take some time to get all of us back on track.

As an essential service, public transport has safely operated throughout COVID-19. It has been a lifeline for our essential workers and the people that rely on the rail network in their everyday lives. But the experience of Auckland, Western Australia and South Australia – where restrictions eased earlier than other jurisdictions – confirms that patronage is unlikely to return to pre-COVID-19 levels for some time.

Every time we lose a passenger from public transport, we face the prospect of more congestion on our roads and more pressure on our infrastructure network. As we all embark on a new, 'COVID normal' life, it is time to get people back on public transport.

In the first eight months of 2020, **rail travel in Australia and New Zealand dropped by 268 million trips**. That's an average of **33 million trips that disappeared from the rail network each month**.

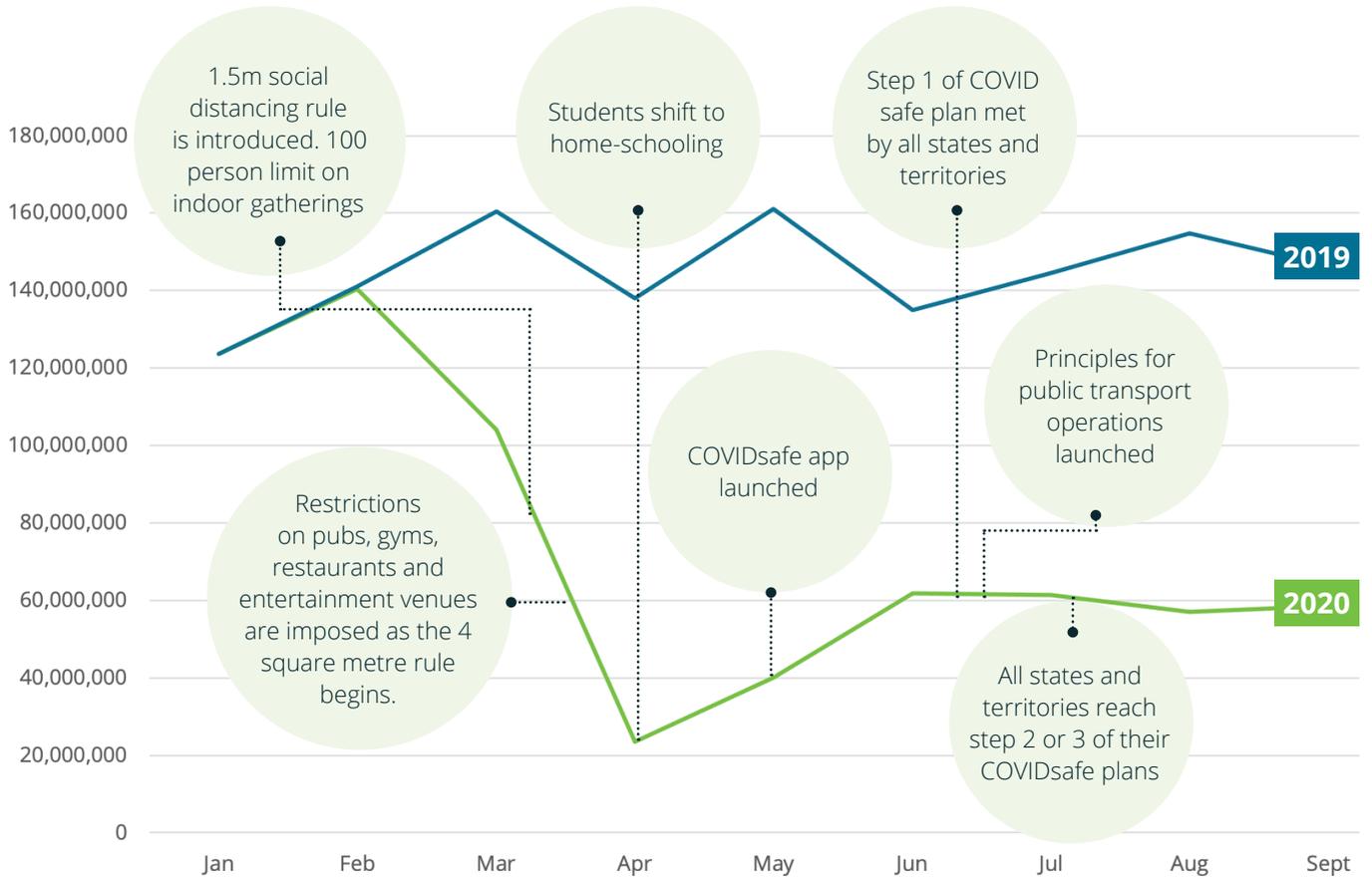


People were faster to return to our roads than our trains and buses. In June 2020, **public transport use was 55 per cent down on 2019**, while use of **toll roads was only 20 per cent lower** than the previous year.



# NATIONAL TRAIN, LIGHT RAIL AND BUS PATRONAGE

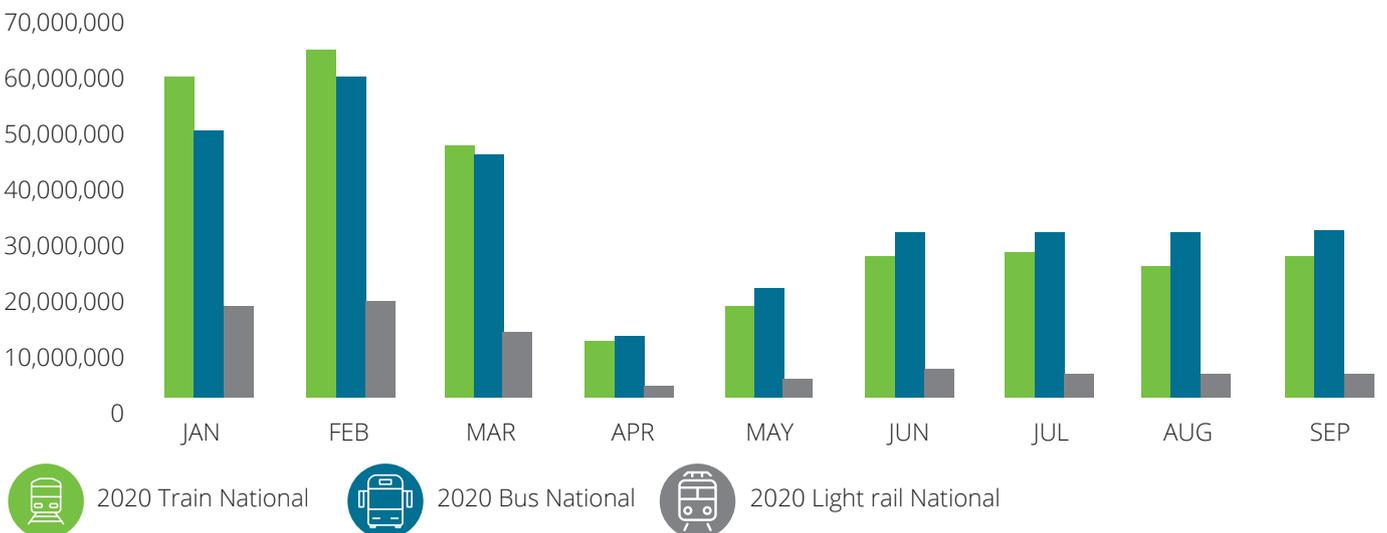
The biggest falls across the public transport network were recorded in April, as restrictions announced in the second half of March took full effect. Light rail networks were hardest hit, **losing 91 per cent of their passengers** in April when compared to the previous year.



## TRAIN, BUS, LIGHT RAIL PASSENGERS 2020

**There has been a slow return to public transport, but confidence is fragile**

Across Australia and New Zealand, there has been a slow return to public transport as restrictions have eased. The early experience of WA, SA and New Zealand suggest a return to normal passenger levels will not be achieved in the short term. On the east coast, recent events have highlighted just how quickly confidence can be shaken.



2020 Train National



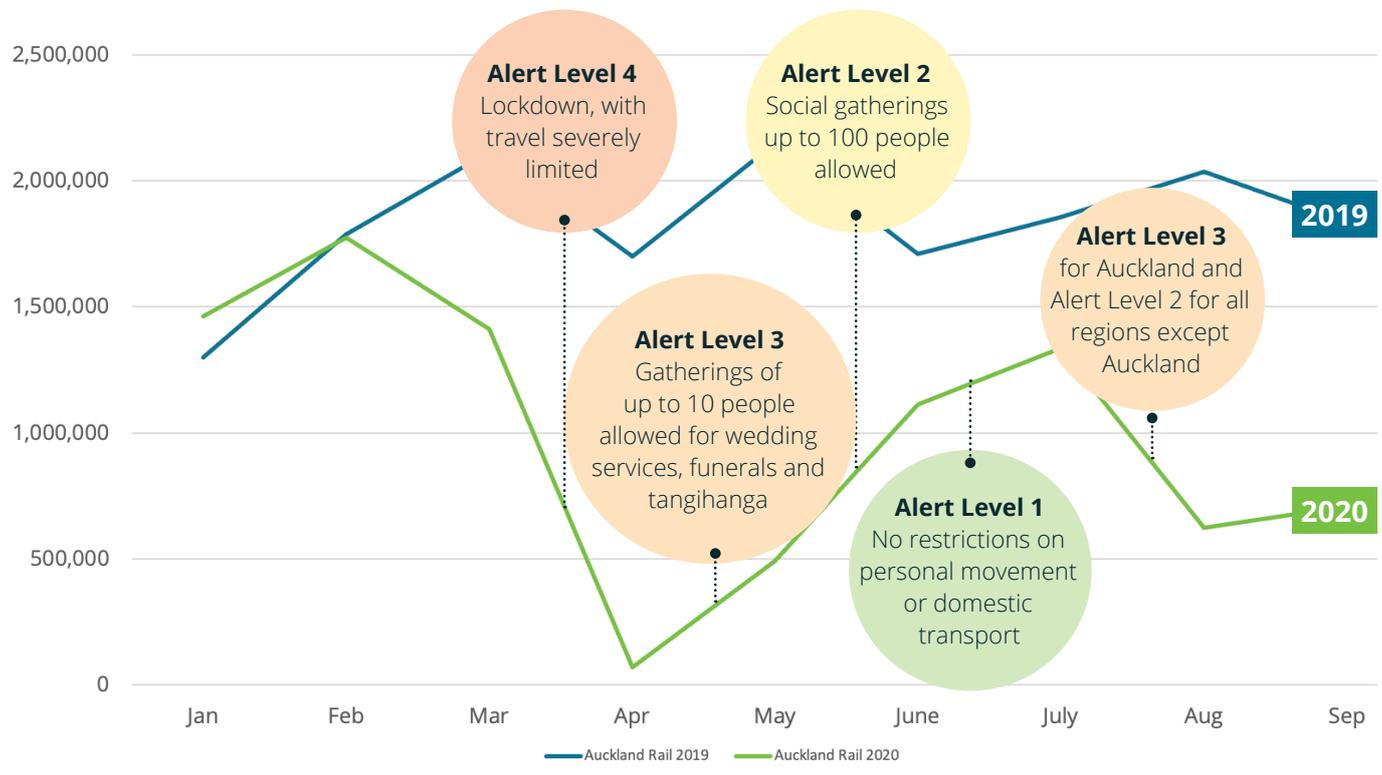
2020 Bus National



2020 Light rail National

## AUCKLAND RAIL PASSENGERS

For two months from 8 June to 12 August, there were no restrictions on personal movement or domestic transport within New Zealand. Despite this, rail patronage remained 31-35 per cent below the same time last year in the months of June and July. It is clear that a removal of restrictions does not result in a return to normal use of public transport.



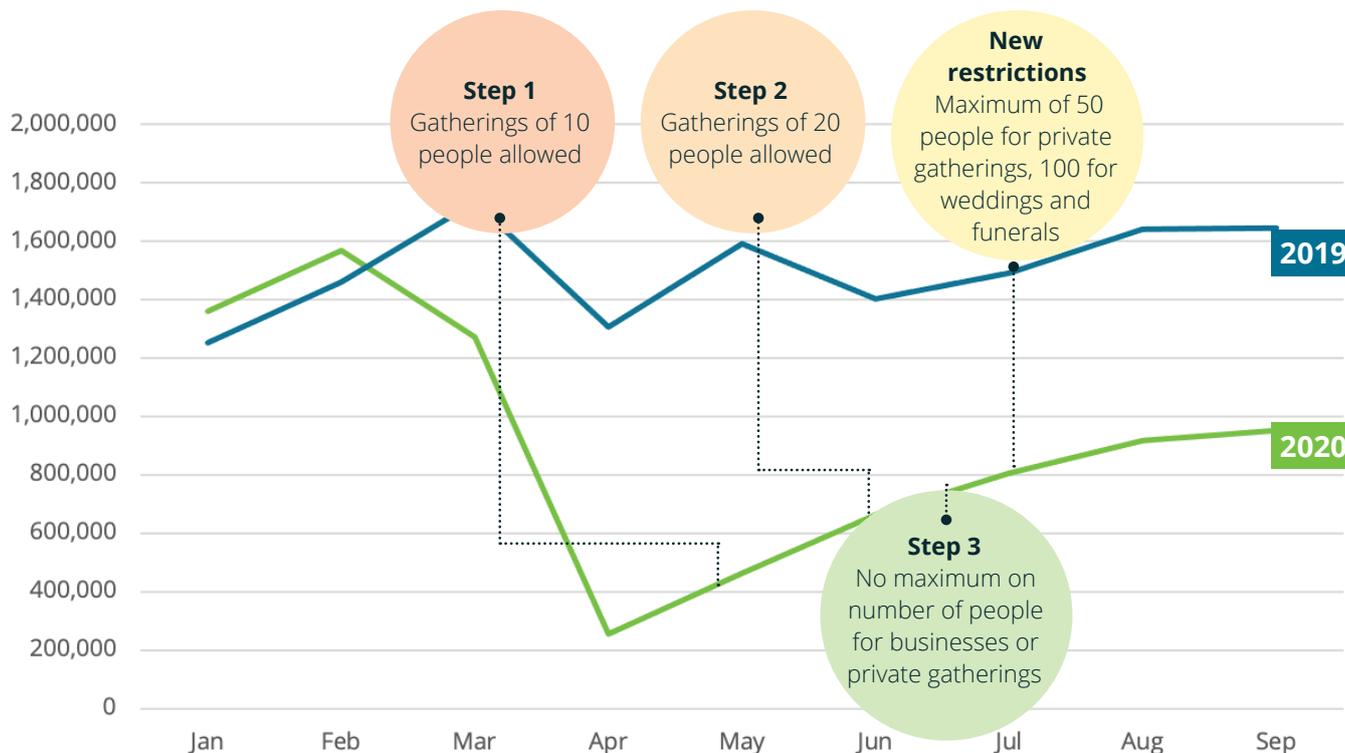
## WESTERN AUSTRALIA TRAIN PASSENGERS

WA is well progressed on its roadmap to ease restrictions. Despite all restrictions on gathering limits being removed in June – and big crowds welcomed to Optus Stadium for the AFL in July – patronage still remained well below previous levels. While gatherings of 100 people were permitted in June, passenger numbers remained 47 per cent down on the prior year. In September, patronage remained at 30 per cent down on the previous year and the latest preliminary data has indicated that passenger numbers have now plateaued.



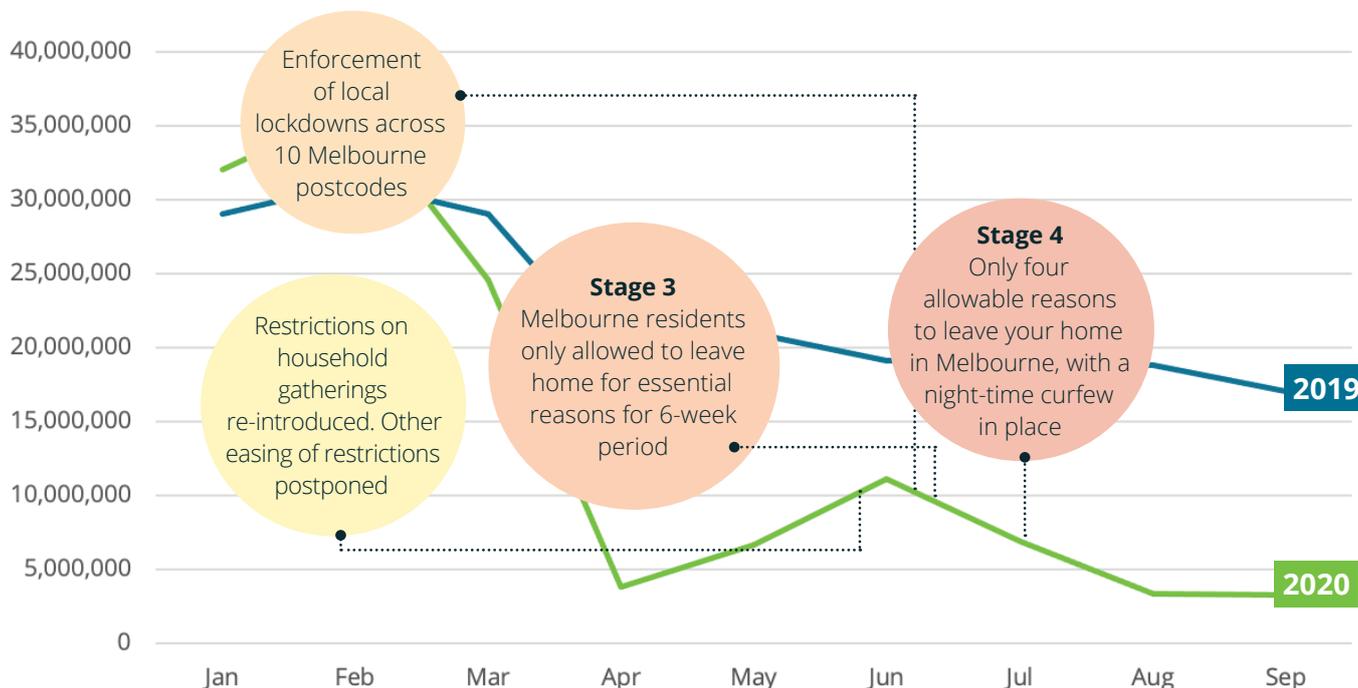
## SOUTH AUSTRALIA TRAIN AND LIGHT RAIL PASSENGERS

Despite a small number of new COVID-19 cases being identified in August and some restrictions being re-introduced, SA has made very good progress on its recovery journey. Limits on public gatherings were removed completely in late June, however this had little impact on passenger numbers. Train and light rail patronage in SA has plateaued at almost half the normal patronage levels, down 42 per cent on 2019 levels in September.



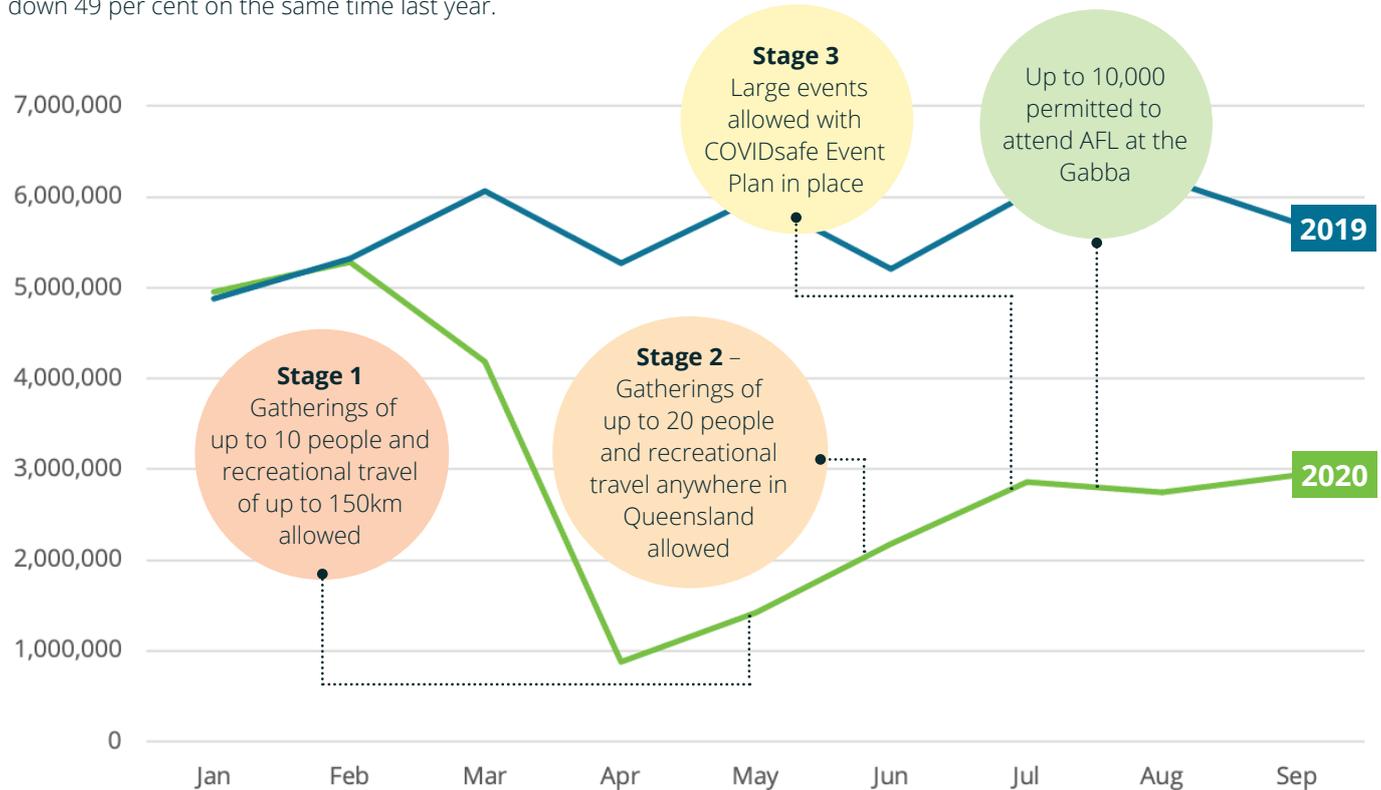
## VICTORIA TRAIN AND LIGHT RAIL PASSENGERS

The recent restrictions in Melbourne and regional Victoria have dramatically impacted the ability of people to resume normal travel habits. However, prior to the second wave of COVID-19, positive progress was being made in May and June. Like other jurisdictions, the gap between 2020 and 2019 patronage was significant even when restrictions had eased. In June passenger numbers were down by 42 per cent, then with new restrictions being imposed in July passenger numbers plunged by 64 per cent on the prior year and were 81 per cent down in September.



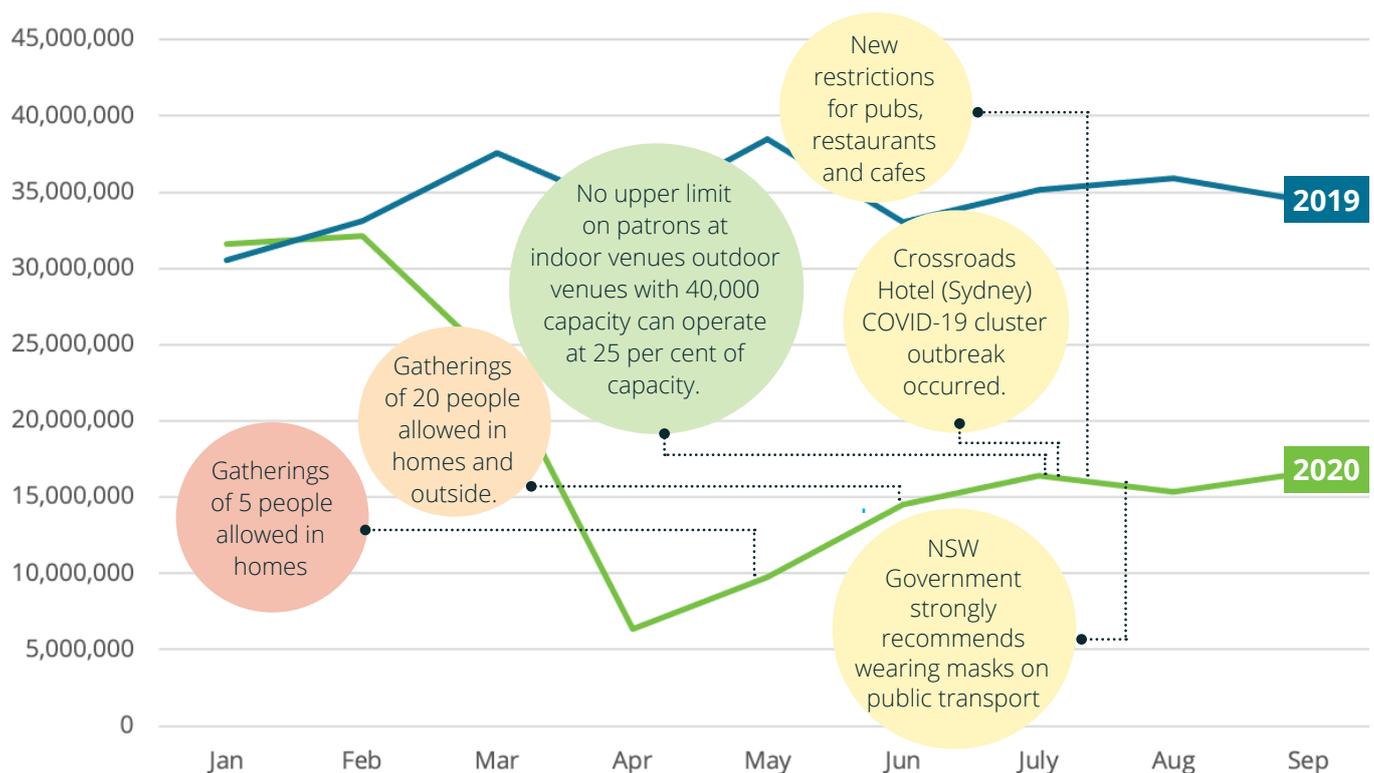
## QUEENSLAND TRAIN AND LIGHT RAIL PASSENGERS

In June, Queenslanders were free to travel anywhere within the state as restrictions eased. But less than half the usual passengers came back to public transport, with patronage down 58 per cent on the previous year. While the recovery period has continued into September, and additional services were added to support social distancing, passenger numbers were still down 49 per cent on the same time last year.



## NEW SOUTH WALES TRAIN AND LIGHT RAIL PASSENGERS

With restrictions beginning to be eased in June and early July, people in NSW were able to move about more freely. Unfortunately, this did not see any significant increase in the number of passengers utilising the rail network. The Crossroads Hotel outbreak in early July and small numbers of new daily cases moving into August has also put downward pressure on patronage. Passenger numbers remained 52 per cent down on the prior year in September.



# HOW THE RAIL INDUSTRY IS RESPONDING TO COVID-19

In 2020, the rail industry has never been more essential. But as we look to the future, we will need to get people back to public transport to make sure our cities and towns remain vibrant, sustainable and accessible.

## How the rail industry is supporting the community

Rail operators have introduced a wide range of measures during the pandemic to support the safe and efficient operation of essential public transport services, including:

- Increased cleaning and hygiene measures are continuing as we return to a more normal way of life
- Operators have maintained or increased schedules to give you space when you need it
- Travel apps and online communications are keeping you informed of what you need to know in real time
- Touchpoints have been minimised, with contactless and cashless payments
- The industry is working with health experts to safely get you where you need to go as circumstances change

## How the ARA is supporting rail operators

The ARA is working closely with public transport operators to support the safe return of people to the rail network.

Reliable and efficient public transport networks will become even more essential as we recover from this pandemic and get back to work, to school and to a more normal way of life.

We are regularly engaging with government and industry to support efforts to welcome people back to public transport, and ensure continued investment in the rail network to facilitate future growth.

To find out more about how the ARA is supporting rail operators as they get back on track, contact ARA General Manager Policy, Research and Advocacy **Simon Bourke** at [sbourke@ara.net.au](mailto:sbourke@ara.net.au).

**25%** of people plan to reduce their use of public transport but this is not a sustainable solution and will see our cities gridlocked.<sup>1</sup>

