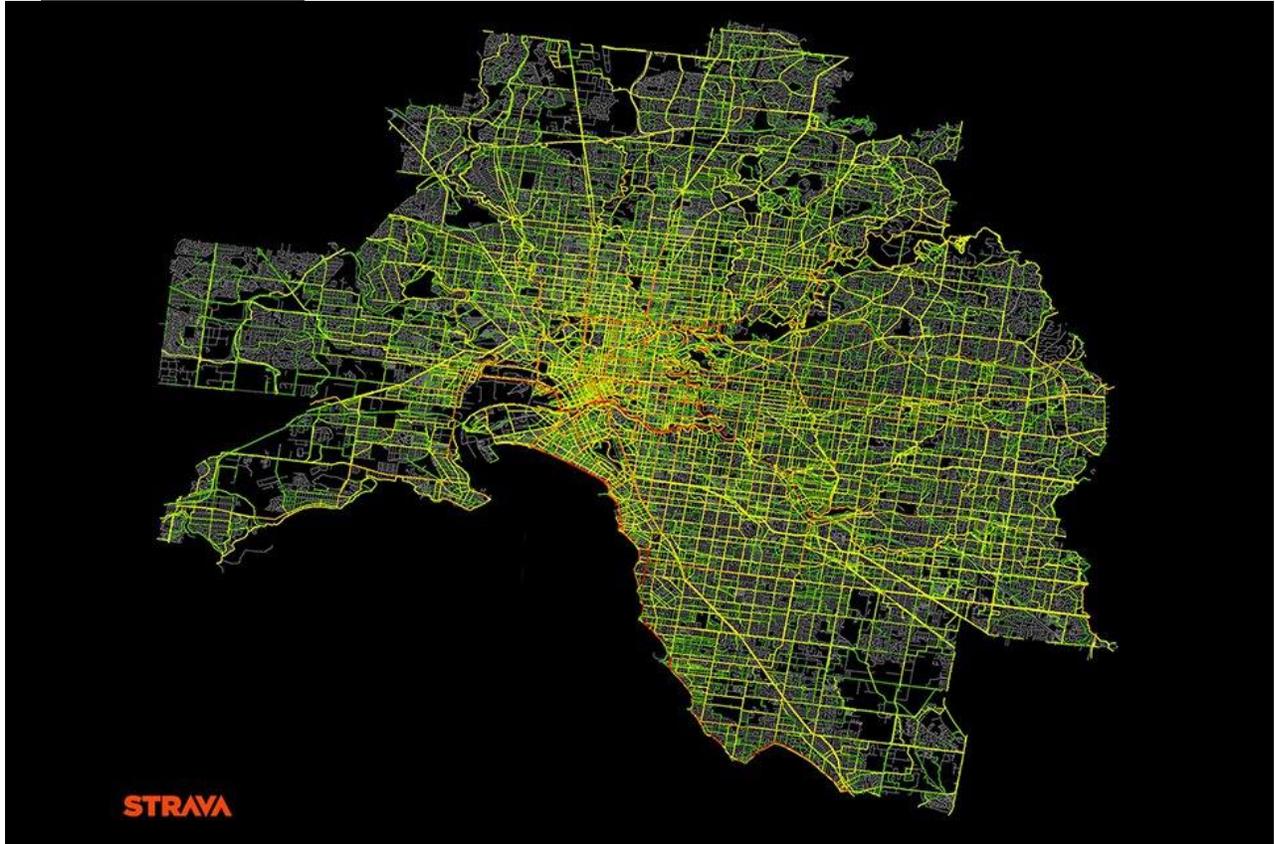


# Why Bike Commuters Should Be Using Strava

Would you track your commutes if you knew the data would be used to make your city safer?

BY CAITLIN GIDDINGS



Strava heat maps of cities like Melbourne give insight into how people really ride. STRAVA

Here's a thought that's never occurred to me during my [commute to work](#): "Hey, why don't I upload this one-mile ride to [Strava](#)?" After all, I've always thought of the app as the bastion of die-hard racers obsessed with crushing KOMs—not as a repository for my little basket-bike jaunts to the office or local bar. But Strava's one-year-old Metro program makes a case for *all* cyclists sharing their city rides, no matter how short or seemingly insignificant.

The company has already amassed tons of data about where people ride, based on uploads to the app. This information has been used to construct heat maps of the most frequently used cycling routes—including commutes, which make up 50 to 70 percent of rides uploaded to Strava.

Now that these heat maps are available to the public, they're useful for [finding routes](#) across a city—and in many cases, more accurate than existing route-search functions like Google Bike Maps. After all, Google's algorithm is based on time and route difficulty, whereas Strava Metro maps reveal where cyclists actually ride in a city.

This data is useful for more than just plotting a course across San Francisco or Philly on your first day in town. It's also valuable to city planners and bike advocates, who are using the information to determine where to focus their infrastructure efforts.

Strava Metro Lead Brian Riordan says several cities have already accessed the data to find out where cyclists are going and how long they're taking to get there. In Boise, Idaho, city planners had a limited number of electronic devices for counting bicycle traffic and used Strava commuting information to determine where to place them. In Queensland, Australia, [city planners](#) purchased Strava's data to get quantitative numbers of how many people are using a new cycle path. Portland, Oregon, has purchased Strava data, and oddly enough, so has Orlando, Florida.

But how representative is Strava's data, really? One huge criticism of the Metro project is that Strava users aren't representative of cyclists as a whole—the data leaves out cyclists like me, who don't care about metrics and aren't prone to sharing their rides. It also leaves out cyclists who live in low-income neighborhoods, who might be in desperate need of bike lanes but don't care about using (or don't have access to) apps. Or new cyclists who aren't [confident riding in traffic](#)—and are most in need of safer routes.

These potholes in the Metro data aren't likely to be patched over soon, but Strava's work with bike advocacy groups is promising. The company has been reaching out to local groups and offering them an exchange: Get your community to use the app to track individual bike commutes. In exchange, you can have access to local data for lobbying city planners or planning advocacy efforts.

When given the opportunity to make their city safer, Riordan says even the Strava-disinclined were interested.

“We heard from a number of people who said, ‘I'd track way more of my rides with Strava if I knew the info were being used to make my city a safer place to ride’” he said.

With more casual-riding Strava users—and more coalition-building between Strava and advocacy groups—the Metro data will only form a more accurate depiction of how a city's cyclists are getting around town. No, it won't include everyone: But if it's better than Google Bike Maps and other existing data, then I want my rides to be a part of it. That alone has convinced me to download and try the app—even if I only ever capture the QOM between my house and the nearest coffee shop.