

How To Make Cycling Safer And More Frequent

Hint: It Doesn't Involve Helmets

By Alex Marshall

THE CLASSIC AMSTERDAM MOM ventures out on her bicycle in rush-hour traffic with a child perched fore and aft—and a bag of groceries in the front basket as well. As she maneuvers through the cars streaming around her, she may also be talking on a cell phone.

In Holland, people chalk this up to the mother's cycling skill. After all, she is just one of the thousands of cyclists of all ages and types who use a bicycle to get around this city. Similar scenes can be found in Copenhagen, Berlin and neighboring Montreal.

In the United States such a mother might be arrested because many states and cities prohibit cycling without a helmet, particularly for children.

The Amsterdam anecdote illustrates what at first seems a strange paradox: states and local governments in the U.S. put far greater emphasis on encouraging or requiring cyclists to wear helmets, with about half the states requiring children to wear them and some localities requiring everyone to do so. Public outreach programs in schools and elsewhere greatly stress helmet-wearing. And in fact, a far greater percentage of cyclists do wear helmets here than in other countries.

But at the same time, far fewer people in this country cycle as general means of transportation, as opposed to a sport or an exercise regimen. And cycling in this country, despite greater rates of helmet usage, appears to be far more dangerous than in other industrialized countries. For example, about ten times the percentage of people wear helmets in the U.S. than in Holland, but about ten times as many people (in percentage terms) bicycle regularly in Holland than here. Given this, you would think that the fatality rate while cycling would be much higher in Holland, given the greater percentage of cyclists and fewer percentage of helmets, but the statistics suggest the rate is higher in the U.S.

What is going on here? There is no question that a cyclist unlucky enough to get in an accident will be safer if he or she is wearing a helmet. But paradoxically, the evidence

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suggests that stressing or requiring helmets is not the best way for governments to promote cycling, make it safer, or to promote an overall healthy population. Why is this?

For one thing, when you require helmet use, you are symbolically putting the burden of safety on the shoulders, or rather the head, of the cyclist. While this fits right in with



the American ethos of individual responsibility, it is not realistic because it is primarily the conduct of others, particularly the drivers of automobiles and trucks, which determines one's safety on a bicycle.

In cities where cycling is common, drivers are taught that a cyclist comes first, both practically and legally. In Holland and most Scandinavian countries, if a driver hits a cyclist, the driver is at fault: period. The European Union is now working to make this a standard policy in the Union. The result is an overall different attitude.

These legal and cultural differences lead us to another drawback of stressing helmet wearing: the "safety in numbers" phenomena. The more people cycle, the more drivers tend to watch out for cyclists and the safer each individual cyclist is. A study by Peter Jacobsen published in *Injury Prevention* found that when you double the number of cyclists, the risk to each individual cyclist drops by a third. But several studies have found that mandatory helmet laws tend to sharply decrease the number of cyclists, probably because it makes cycling less convenient and less fun. Fewer cyclists overall could cancel out any direct health benefits of wearing a helmet.

Ben Hamilton-Baille, an English planner and former Harvard Loeb Fellow who helped set up the National Cycling Network in Great Britain, said they intentionally left out photos of cyclists wearing helmets on brochures because they felt it discouraged cycling.

Jens E. Pedersen, Director of the Danish Cyclist Federation in Copenhagen, has this to say, "More people are dying because they are not moving, because they are sitting too much in front of a television or computer, then people are dying because they are moving on a bicycle and hit by a car."

"In Denmark, people using a bike have a sort of feeling of freedom. They want to feel the wind in their hair. They don't want to wear a helmet."

Copenhagen, where Pedersen said as many as 30,000 cyclists use some streets every day, is a very different environment than in any American city. Still, the dangers of not moving are even more present here than in Denmark. More than 10% of American children under 15 are clinically obese—by far the highest rate in the world. By comparison, less than two percent of Danish youths are obese.

Lastly, focusing on helmet-usage does nothing to change the design of streets and highways, which are too often only set up to speed cars along, without regard to cyclists or pedestrians. How you can redesign streets is a subject rich with possibilities.

I am not telling people who bicycle not to wear helmets. Given how dangerous conditions are in this country, it actually makes more sense to wear a helmet here than in Copenhagen or Montreal. But what is smart for an individual is not necessarily smart for a government. City and state governments, who do have the power to make cycling both safer and more convenient, should concentrate their attention on the conditions that can advance those goals. Those are educating drivers, stiffening penalties, encouraging cycling as a means of transportation, creating more bike lanes and working to turn highways into streets. If cities and state work conscientiously on these efforts, in a number of years it may just be possible to sally forth on a bicycle—with or without a helmet—perhaps even with a child balancing on a set of handlebars, and to do so safely. □