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Transportation Statistics: Why Americans are Spinning Their Wheels

Jackie Shane

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"May is National Bike Month" says the League of American Bicyclists <http://www.bikeleague.org/index.cfm>. One day a year bicycle commuters around the country are rewarded with various festivities including dignitary speeches and music. Though the bike commuter's mantra is "One Less Car," cars continue to squeeze out cyclists. While grassroots groups work hard to create guides for employers, government support remains lacking. While federal policy sanctions fuel consumption, the country pays in terms of congested roads, respiratory illness, obesity, global climate change, resource depletion, and pollution. <http://www.bikemonth.com/> Some cyclists pay even a higher price.

Hard heads and helmets

The agencies that collect data on bicycle commuting in the United States tend to focus on safety and death. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Federal Highway Administration, and the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center sponsored a National Bicycle Safety Conference. The outcome was a document entitled, *National Strategies for Advancing Bicycle Safety* available at: http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/pedbimot/bike/bicycle_safety/. This white paper assumes that if cyclists would practice safety measures such as wearing helmets, the number of cycling fatalities would decline, and specifically makes recommendations that states implement mandatory helmet laws. Goal five of the summary however proposes an additional 100,000 miles of bike routes throughout the United States (see summary).

According to the U.S. Statistical Abstract

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/statab/sec21.pdf> there were 13.8 million car accidents, and 41,000 deaths (chart no. 1035) in 1998. According to the Fatal Accident Reporting System <http://www-fars.nhtsa.dot.gov/>, the number of people killed in their cars is about 50 times the number of cyclists killed each year, but only .4% of Americans commute by bike. Though cyclists and pedestrians suffer about 13% of the injuries and deaths on highways, less than 1% of highway funding is spent for sidewalks and bike routes.

Transportation planners often view cyclists as a liability, and like to publish crash data, as if to warn people that riding should be done at one's own risk. The hazard information can be used to support mandatory helmet laws that become a means to fine a cyclist for not wearing a helmet and discourage cycling in general. It is no wonder that cyclists are killed each year by motorists since they usually share roads with no shoulder, analogous perhaps to motorists having to share an airport runway with commercial planes. Sadly, drunk drivers are the primary cause of cyclist fatalities and injuries.

http://www.sos.state.il.us/departments/drivers/traffic_safety/bike-pedestrian_safety/bikesafetypast.html Perhaps not surprisingly, more than half of the

bicyclists riding in or near traffic report feeling unsafe, according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics survey.

http://www.bts.gov/programs/omnibus_surveys/household_survey/2000/october/summary_report.html

If you build it, they will come

A study in Seattle found that the strongest determinant of whether someone will bicycle to a destination is the availability of safe routes free from speeding motorists. (*Cycling and the built environment, a US perspective* [Transportation Research: Part D](#); May 2005, Vol. 10 Issue 3, p245-261, 17p). While American transportation planners worry about helmets and lights, in China and the Netherlands planners simply build safe bicycle routes. According to [Bicycling Magazine](#), which frequently reports on the best and worst places to ride a bicycle, (*Bicycling* v33.n4 (May 1992): pp58, 6) the Netherlands invests 10% of their transportation budget in bicycle infrastructures. This number stands in contrast to about 0.2% in the United States. Bicycle lanes in Holland terminate ahead of cars at intersections in order to shelter cyclists from exhaust fumes. Boulder, CO, a very bike-friendly community, devotes 19% of their transportation budget to bicycle facilities, demonstrating the difference transportation planners can make at the metropolitan level.

<http://www.bicyclefriendlycommunity.org/May2004PressRelease.htm>

Often Federal funding for transportation projects requires a 20% match on behalf of the states. http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/injury/pedbimot/bike/Safe-Routes-2004/pages/appendix-e_federalstate.htm

Finding bicycle or pedestrian financial outlays poses huge challenges. According to the National Highway Transportation Safety Administration approximately \$200 million per year is spent on bicycling and related facilities. This compares to \$107 billion spent on highways. (*The Statistical Abstract of the United States*, chart no. 1018, taken from *Highway Statistics*, U.S. Federal Highway Administration).

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/statab/sec21.pdf>

However, the director of the Bicycle Coalition of New Mexico (Gail Ryba) points out that a better calculation is to examine the Statewide Transportation Improvement Program (STIP) <http://www.nmshtd.state.nm.us/main.asp?secid=11408>, under which bicycle and pedestrian improvements are funded. According to the STIP for New Mexico, 0.5% of transportation funds were spent on bicycle improvements for Albuquerque. This number was 0% for Las Cruces, a city with a considerably smaller population. This disparity arises since Albuquerque has a population over 200,000 and can request Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ) funding which can only be used for projects that mitigate congestion. It is important to review the Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) for a city. For Las Cruces, if we examine the spreadsheet

http://lcmpoweb.las-cruces.org/mpo_documents/2005%20TIP%20REPORT%2004-07-05.pdf

we notice that based on the focus of projects by title, none of the projects earmarked for state and federal transportation funds for bicycle road improvements were funded (look for the phrase “proposed unfunded” on page 3.)

The proportion of Americans who drive to work has risen 11%, while the proportion of those commuting by bike has declined by 1% in the last decade. Trips that are less than a mile in distance are done by car 84% of the time. (French, Story, and Jeffrey, *Environmental Influences on Eating and Physical Activity*, an epidemiological study examining obesity in America.

<http://arjournals.annualreviews.org/doi/pdf/10.1146/annurev.publhealth.22.1.309>

So it seems Americans are either getting fattened or flattened.

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