

Protecting Cyclists Requires Institutional Advocacy

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The U.S. has always had a car-dominant culture. Whether it's the tight streets of Manhattan, sprawling metros like Houston, or the "California dream" post-war suburbs, we have built our communities around the idea that cars are the only option. Compare this development plan to communities in other countries: Denmark, The Netherlands, and Sweden¹, among many others have built their infrastructure with alternative transportation modes in mind, chief among them the bicycle. How can we build a culture that empowers cyclists, protects them from danger, and creates more integrated transit systems?

Bicycling in the U.S. is a contact sport. When a car traveling just 23mph has already a 10% chance of killing a pedestrian, and the risks only escalating, how are we not treating cyclist and pedestrian safety as a public health issue? Many cities lack even basic protective infrastructure so bicyclists are left to ride feet away from multi-ton vehicles barreling down roads at high speeds. In forward-thinking communities, much work and investment has been made into rehabilitating our streets to include cycling lanes—but the progress is few and far between, relying on passionate local activists to achieve anything. Even then, common solutions like bicycle lanes are band-aids; without driver knowledge or protective measures like bicycle friendly intersections, the impetus is always on the individual cyclist to fend for their life.

The culture of respect for bicycling among other commuters varies widely. We know that as cycling becomes more embedded in a community and a perceived choice for transit, fatalities and injuries are actually reduced (*Figure 1*).

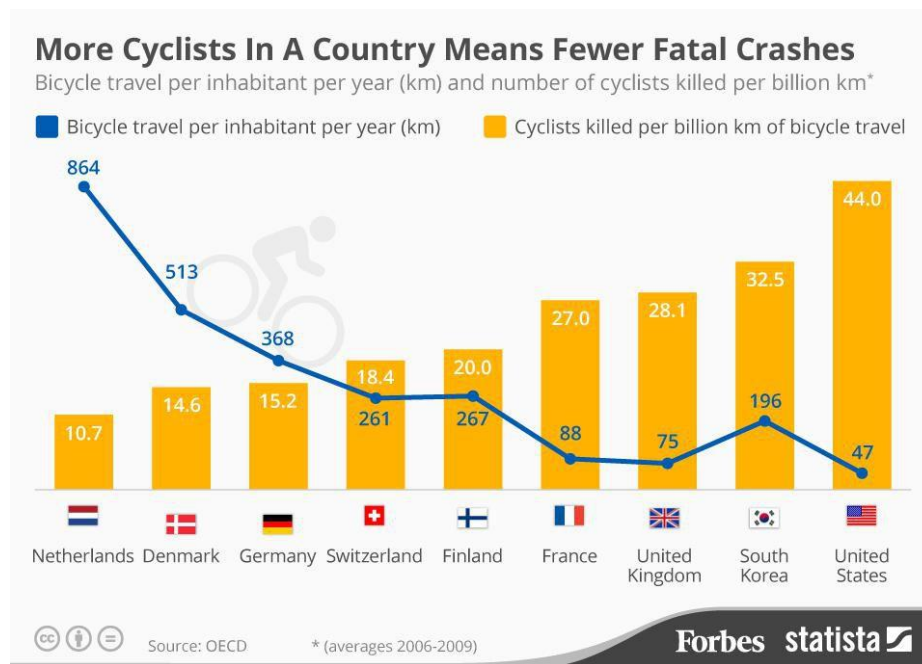


Figure 1. Travel vs. fatalitiesⁱⁱ.

Deference to bicyclists on the road is not embedded in the American conscience. In fact, many Americans are anti-cyclist, despite evidence presented in studies like Portland State's that showed bicyclists did not impact automobilists' speeds when sharing the roadⁱⁱⁱ. We need broad advocacy, especially as climate change becomes even more relevant in our personal choices. As the car industry has billions in ads, so we need to start thinking about the brand of bicycling. Solutions like NYC's Vision Zero campaign for reduced cyclist death are a start, adding 28 miles of protected bus lanes last year^{iv}, but how can we think bigger, broader, and bolder? We need dedicated action, including community toolkits that take the best learnings, both domestic and international, to replicate into our own neighborhoods.

With bike sales up 120% last year due to the impact of COVID-19^v, this is only going to be a growing public debate. The best solution is to be an advocate at an institutional level. Requiring transit infrastructure to consider the needs of all commuters, regardless of mode, is a start. Funding innovations for cyclist safety, like next-gen helmets^{vi} and better visibility gear also needs to be a part of

any solution. But creating a culture of change and investing in protective measures at the institutions that design our communities is ultimately what's needed to protect cyclists.

ⁱ <https://www.everythingoverseas.com/31/05/2018/around-the-world-on-two-wheels-six-of-the-best-countries-for-cycling-in-2018/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2015/02/24/the-more-cyclists-in-a-country-the-fewer-fatal-crashes-report-infographic/?sh=1ec890433b31>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/07/200723171957.htm>

^{iv} <https://www1.nyc.gov/content/visionzero/pages/>

^v <https://www.bicycling.com/news/a34587945/coronavirus-bike-shortage/>

^{vi} <https://lumoshelmet.co/>