

Bike Safety Is a Community Effort: The Need for Equitable Bike Infrastructure

by Otelo Reggy-Beane, Yale Law School

Often regarded as one of the most bike-friendly cities in the country,¹ my hometown Portland, Oregon, was not free of the problems cyclists too often face. “Be extra careful on the roads today,” my high school English teacher would occasionally warn our class after having an unsafe encounter on his daily commute to school. I could not fully comprehend his warning until I tried biking across the Portland metro area.

I started my commute on one of the many designated bike trails in the western suburbs. But as I zipped past the Nike World Headquarters, where I learned to ride a bike, the trails and bike lanes gradually disappeared along with the distance between myself and cars. I felt unsafe because I felt invisible. There was little I could do to protect myself if a driver forgot to check their blind spot when making a right turn. I rode on edge until I reached the Sunset Highway Bike Path that took me into the city towards the eastern suburbs.

Biking through the east side of the city, which is home to most of the city’s communities of color, I noticed a drastic decline in bike infrastructure. Most areas I rode through did not have sidewalks let alone bike lanes. Instead of riding beside cars, I was riding with them. Once again, I was at risk of being one of the almost 15,000 cyclists injured due to driver distraction.²

What also struck me was how poorly maintained the roads were on the east side. I zigzagged my way through neighborhoods, trying my best to avoid potholes. Though there sometimes wasn’t even a car in sight, I still felt unsafe and decided to cut my cross-city ride short.

¹ <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/407660>

² <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov/Api/Public/ViewPublication/813060>

While far from embracing grand scale bike infrastructure like many western European cities,³ Portland, Oregon, is certainly no foe of bike-friendly transportation planning. From bicycle-specific traffic signals to bicycle boxes, the city makes it easy for residents to embrace the climate-friendly mode of transportation.⁴ However, these protective measures are not equitably distributed across the metro region. Studying the history of disinvestment in east Portland's communities of color clarified the unevenness of the city's bike infrastructure.⁵

Inequitable biking infrastructure not only robs low-income people and people of color of access to a healthier, more affordable transportation option, but it also thwarts the city's climate mitigation efforts and maintains Portlanders' dependency on cars. Cities across the country should instead concentrate funding towards improving roads and expanding bike infrastructure in historically disinvested neighborhoods. Such improvements have been found to increase cycling by almost half and decrease crashes.^{6/7} Cities should also uplift community organizations work to promote a cycling culture and invest in driver-facing programs that heighten awareness of cyclists and pedestrians. Bike safety is a community effort and investing in equitable biking infrastructure ensures that *all* cyclists are safe regardless of their race and income.

³ <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-14/milan-plans-bike-lane-infrastructure-to-rival-paris>

⁴ <https://www.portlandoregon.gov/transportation/article/407660>

⁵ KJ Gibson (2007), "Bleeding Albina: A History of Community Disinvestment, 1940-2000," *Transforming Anthropology*, 15(1), 3-25

⁶ <https://www.pnas.org/content/118/15/e2024399118>

⁷ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1361920921003254>