

Reinterpreting the Danger Associated with Bicycling in America

by Victoriana Shannon

Growing up, my understanding of the challenges that bicyclists routinely faced was grounded in the tragic narratives my mother would relay to me of close friends, colleagues, and strangers. As I got older, and we moved to the countryside of San Antonio, encounters with bicyclists became frequent and expected, and each time my mother would again say, “These roads are dangerous for them.” While that seemed to be true, why was it the case? A seemingly naive thought I used to have was that the challenges and fatalities of bicyclists had to be due only to the poor driving of others coupled with the overt vulnerability of the bicyclists themselves. Now, I see this as a severe oversimplification, and one that casts their struggles in terms of isolated incidences. This question of why continues to loom over my own experiences as a driver and implies a level of neglect toward adequately ensuring the lives of bicyclists on a far reaching and fundamental level.

One of the challenges I’ve realized from my own perception of bicycling comes from labeling it as an inherently dangerous activity. It is not the act of bicycling that is dangerous, but rather the lack of diligence in providing safe and accessible means to travel by bike. Labeling it as such undermines the task at hand. As a student attending a university in a large city, bicycling is an increasingly prevalent mode of transportation. While there exists some evidence of accommodation for bicyclists, including biking lanes, it doesn’t appear as a consistent theme throughout my university, much less the rest of the city. Intersections are especially tailored to favor traffic flow of cars and trucks, and leave little consideration of bicyclists in the absence of biking lanes and allowance for right turns on red lights. Such configurations in infrastructure seem to invite the potential for unnecessary accidents, seemingly rewriting the context of these so-called accidents as intentional disregard. In 2020 alone, there were approximately 39,000 fatalities involving motor vehicles, 20 percent of which included nonoccupants of vehicles, such as bicyclists.¹ These statistics are a greater indication of the growing challenges bicyclists are facing in today's infrastructure climate and driving trends, including the rise in speed limits across states², increased vehicle traffic, and the ever present dangers of distracted driving. However, when protected bike lanes were installed in NYC, an area known traditionally for its heavy traffic flow, injury crashes for all road users dropped by 40 percent and by more than 50 percent in some locations.³ This suggests a strong correlation between the proper implementation of safety features, or the lack thereof, and road user safety. Again, this seems to highlight the distinction between labeling bicycling as dangerous and recognizing that an equitable environment for all modes of transportation has not yet been realized.

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/21/opinion/bike-road-safety-infrastructure.html>

² <https://www.iihs.org/news/detail/speed-limit-increases-are-tied-to-37-000-deaths-over-25-years>

³ <https://www.peopleforbikes.org/statistics/safety>

⁴ <https://bikeleague.org/StateBikeLaws>

It appears that a majority of people would agree that bicycling is dangerous³, but the nuance as to what specifically contributes to the risk seems to operate under vague circumstances. To mitigate some of the challenges bicyclists face, states have implemented their own laws to help reduce some of the encounters between bicycles and motor vehicles. Some areas of law that are meant to safeguard bicyclists include safe passing laws, helmet laws, vulnerable road user laws, among others that are meant to detail where and how bicyclists are allowed to ride in traffic. However, not all states have been proactive in implementing laws within these categories, and instead rely on general traffic laws.⁴ Improvements to statewide protections for bicyclists should include defining some of these parameters within the law in terms of specific legislation, such as the approximate distance appropriate to pass a bicyclist and requiring that all bicyclists wear helmets. Additionally, implementing a standardized program to educate bicyclists of their own safety in traffic similar to drivers education and in obtaining a motorcycle license may also be necessary. Finally, allocating funds towards restructuring infrastructure to accommodate bicyclists will be required, which is currently being realized with initiatives such as the USDOT's Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) grants that aim to address the demand for frequent and common biking routes.⁵

While there has been evidence of some improvements and general awareness of the challenges faced by bicyclists, there needs to be a greater discussion of the specificities involved in protecting bicyclists. The effects of narrowing these challenges to an overarching theme of inherent danger or tragedy in the wake of unfortunate accidents inspires a culture of continued negligence. An interesting point is that it shouldn't necessarily be considered an "accident" when it is the direct result of unaddressed and overlooked issues.⁶ Instituting a culture of increased awareness, through educating both motor vehicle drivers and bicyclists on a more thoughtful level, in addition to incorporating bike lanes, protection barriers, marked corners for bicyclists to wait at intersections, among countless other measures, needs to be paramount in considering the safety of bicyclists moving forward.

⁵ <https://www.railstotrails.org/trailblog/2022/september/12/new-federal-funding-for-safe-walking-and-biking-routes-could-help-meet-booming-demand/>

⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/21/opinion/bike-road-safety-infrastructure.html>