

Cycling Safety in NSW: Attitudes and Behaviours

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Abstract

The number of people cycling in NSW has increased in recent years. Over the last decade, an average of 11 cyclists have been killed each year in NSW, and from 2009-2013, 7,669 were seriously injured. The main objective of this research was to explore the attitudes, behaviours and beliefs of cyclists and drivers in relation to cycling safety. It comprised focus groups and a survey undertaken with cyclists and drivers in late 2015. The findings contribute towards a deeper understanding of the factors that may influence bicycle crashes, and points to potential avenues for action to improve cycling safety.

Context

In 2014, 11 cyclists were killed and, in 2013, the most recent reporting year, 1,800 were seriously injured in hospital-reported crashes. While this represents a comparatively small proportion of total annual casualties on NSW roads, cyclists are a vulnerable road user group, and are more susceptible to serious injury than more protected vehicle occupants. Prior research conducted by Transport for NSW indicates that safety is a key barrier to adopting cycling for transport.

This research was commissioned by the NSW Centre for Road Safety to better understand the attitudes and behaviours of NSW drivers and cyclists around cycling safety.

Methodology

The research program commenced with a qualitative phase comprising 11 focus groups with cyclists and motorists, designed to inform the subsequent quantitative phase. The quantitative research comprised an online survey of 2,064 road users. This included n=1,040 drivers and n=1,024 cyclists. All fieldwork was conducted between August and November 2015. The research canvassed a range of areas relating to cycling safety, awareness and perceptions of cycling related road-rules, and driver and cyclist behaviour.

Research findings

Key findings from the research include:

- *There is some recognition of shared responsibility.* The quantitative findings supported the common perception in the qualitative research that no one group is always at fault in collisions, and that a combination of factors arising out of the behaviour of both parties is usually to blame.
- *Opinions diverge about what is common sense or appropriate cyclist behaviour.* In the qualitative research, views differed greatly between individuals and ranged from it being most appropriate for cyclists to act like motor vehicles (not being allowed on footpaths and obeying traffic lights), to it being appropriate for cyclists to essentially behave like pedestrians.

- *Rule-breaking by cyclists is sometimes seen as socially acceptable.* Perceived social acceptability of cyclist rule-breaking varied considerably depending on the road rule in question.
- *Understanding of road rules is limited.* Both the qualitative and quantitative findings indicate limited understanding of, and little thought given to, the road rules relating to cyclists among either cyclists or motorists.
- *Rule breaking by cyclists is relatively common.* Nearly one in three cyclists (29%) reported knowingly breaking the road rules at least sometimes. As compliance decreases, perception of the social acceptability of breaking road rules increases, suggesting either the role of perceived social norms in guiding behaviour or the post-rationalisation of poor behaviour. Rule-breaking also appears at least in part fuelled by a lack of knowledge of the illegality of the behaviour.
- *Some motorists are not routinely checking for cyclists.* The most common motorist behaviours that may put cyclists at risk relate to a failure to specifically check for cyclists on the road.

Conclusions

The research points to several potential avenues to improve cycling safety in NSW. The research will be used to help implement *Transport for NSW's Cycling Safety Action Plan 2014–2016* and guide future Action Plans, to reduce the risky behaviour of both cyclists and drivers and improve the safety of cyclists using the Safe Systems approach.