

Safer cycling for women: an evaluation of a cycling skills training program

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Abstract

In Australia, the most frequently reported barriers to cycling for females are safety concerns and lack of knowledge. In this initiative, a cycling skills training program was made available to women aged 50 years and older who are not regular cyclists. Comparison of cycling behaviour pre-and-post program show that skills training, supported rides and an environment to discuss safe cycling practices to increased cycling among the women. Importantly, participants report increased feelings of safety when riding.

Background

In Australia, the primary barriers to cycling for many people, particularly females, are concerns about safety and lack of knowledge (Garrard et al., 2012; Bonham & Wilson, 2012). Further, for females cycling is not a socially normative behaviour that is, their friends don't ride (Zander et al., 2013). This social reality, coupled with a lack of knowledge about safe bicycle handling skills, safe riding practices when riding close to motor vehicles and where to ride to stay on connected bicycle lanes, results in fewer females regularly cycling.

Across Australia, governments' policies identify increasing participation as an important lever to pull to achieve targets for improved health, transport and environmental outcomes (Austroads, 2010). However, increased participation cannot be achieved solely through more males cycling. To achieve broad social wellbeing goals, females are an essential part of the solution, so concerns, including about safety, must be addressed.

The aim of this study was to evaluate a safe cycling skills training program for women aged over 50 years.

Method

This study is an evaluation of a cycling skills training program delivered in Melbourne. Two courses were planned to run simultaneously, one with a group of adult women over 50 years. Women were recruited via Wheel Women, promotion through the City of Yarra, and the Amy Gillett Foundation website and social media channels. A second program with girls aged 15-18 years was promoted heavily but failed to attract uptake. This result revealed previously unanticipated additional barriers to facilitating cycling participation of young women.

Safe cycling skills program

The four week program, run by AustCycle qualified trainers, coached participants to develop skills in safe bicycle handling, riding in traffic and basic bicycle maintenance (e.g. fix flat tyre). Participants

completed four group rides that taught them to navigate routes in a range of road types, speed zones and traffic conditions.

Evaluation

All participants completed a baseline survey of cycling experience, current travel modes, attitudes towards cycling and expectations of the program. Participants also completed a post-program survey which tracked any differences from baseline in attitudes and actual cycling activity. Analysis is currently underway.

Results and Conclusions

In total, 17 women completed the four week course. While women identified the importance of learning skills, greater value was given to the peer-support and instructor. Women appreciated a supportive, judgement-free space to discuss their concerns, somewhere to 'ask stupid questions'. Most women indicated the importance of feeling 'safe' and 'encouraged' to develop confidence in their cycling skills.

They also report feeling more confident and safer on the roads compared to pre-program. All participants indicated they either rode 'about the same' or 'more' after participating in the program. A combination of practical and social barriers exist for this group. Practical barriers to participation included the logistics of fitting another activity into already busy school and sport schedules. Social barriers and potentially a lack of self-identification with cycling culture contribute to a reluctance to engage with cycling.

References

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