

Helmet laws do nothing for safety and discourage cycling

Cycling has many advantages as a mode of transportation; it emits far less greenhouse gases than motoring, and it is beneficial to health. The most substantial barriers to the use of cycling for transportation are laws which forbid cyclists to ride without a helmet. All evidence proves a 30-40% decline in public cycling following enforcement of these laws. According to West Australian government data, more than 50% of child cyclists stopped cycling to school in the five years following enforcement. Any increase in cycling numbers over the past 10 years has been from the disastrously low levels of the 1990s. Mandatory bicycle helmet laws have thus had a serious impact on public health and global warming.

For example, in Western Australia, the population grew by 30% and petrol prices doubled from 1991 to 2006. But government road surveys showed only 6.5% more cyclists in 2006 than in 1991. As reported in 2007 and based on data from Western Australia, Queensland and Victoria, the number of Australian children walking or riding a bicycle to school has plunged from about 80% in 1977 to around 5% at present. International research published in 2008 shows that fewer people cycle in Australia than almost any other country in the world. Women in particular are discouraged from cycling by helmet laws.

These laws have not improved cyclist safety. Government data in Western Australia shows cyclist numbers had recovered to 1991 pre-law levels by 2000, by which time cyclist hospital admissions were 30% per annum higher than the pre-law average. Hospital and Health Department data in all jurisdictions show there was no decrease in cyclist injuries following helmet law enforcement, despite the 30-40% decline in cyclist numbers. Helmets have been known for years not to perform as designed in real accidents; the foam is too stiff and does not crush as intended.(Corner et al, Sundahl) There has been no reduction in the percentage of head injuries among cyclists when laws are enforced, as compared with the experience of other groups on the roads.(Robinson) We repeatedly hear that cycle helmets provide over 80% protection; this is based on old, small-scale, grossly invalid studies.(<http://www.cyclehelmets.org/mf.html?1068>) Governments should ignore this discredited work.

Encouraging cycling for routine transportation on a truly mass scale will require careful planning, time, and some investment (Pucher and Buehler) but Australia has a simple, cost-free solution to part of the problem: repeal cycle helmet laws.

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References:

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Other links:

<http://www.cycle-helmets.com>

<http://www.cyclehelmets.org>