

Does the cycling renaissance have to be so bloody?

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Recent weeks have been tragic for the families and friends of five cyclists killed on the nation's roads. We mourn the deaths, and note with sadness the serious injuries that others have suffered. These events send a signal, a powerful and unmistakable message that we must reconsider the way New Zealand's roads mix large number of motor vehicles with more vulnerable road users.

Cyclists are returning to New Zealand's roads, not just in response to the weather improving, but in a year on year trend that is consistent with a more global cycling renaissance. The same trends are being seen in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom, all countries that share our car-centred urban design.

Cycling is cheap and often the fastest way to negotiate trips through a crowded city – aspects of cycling that will become even more attractive as fuel prices increase, the economic downturn continues and our roads become more congested. Regular short transport trips by bicycle are also a good way to get enough exercise without too much exertion or the costs of going to the gym. As well as the personal benefits, cycling has important positive effects for society. If people cycle for transport, the reduction in car use means less air pollution and traffic congestion and less disease due to physical inactivity. We have calculated that changing just 5% of short car trips by adults to bicycle trips would lead to health improvements in the order of \$200 million each year. Cycling for transport can also make an important contribution to reducing greenhouse gas emissions and enabling fair access to goods and services.

Do we have to accept an increase in cycling injuries and deaths in order to gain these benefits? Not at all. It is evident overseas that it is possible to increase cycling without sacrificing safety. In both New York City and London the number of cyclists has doubled over the past decade without increases in cycling deaths and serious injuries. In both cities the risk of severe injury per cyclist has roughly halved.

We can learn a lot from cities like New York and London. The biggest lesson is that a safe and attractive physical environment is more important than safety education or changing public attitudes. The environment we live and move around in must not cater just for the adventurous minority. It must be suitable for people with a wide range of abilities, courage and experience. Transport planners call this infrastructure. The rise in safe cycling elsewhere follows well thought through and widespread road changes, such as, physically separating cyclists from cars and pedestrians on main roads, and slowing traffic to a speed where all road users can safely mingle on quiet residential streets. Sea changes in social attitudes and behaviour follow physical changes, as more people feel safe travelling through their neighbourhoods on foot and by bike, and respond to this experience by driving less and driving differently.

A common feature in all cities that have transformed their cycling environments has been strong leadership, from both local authorities and national government. In New Zealand, politicians may need to be reminded of the strong economic case for cycle-friendly transport systems. Best practice cycling infrastructure is a good value investment. The \$1.7 billion dollar cost of the 38km of state highway proposed from Puhoi to Wellsford has a return on investment from congestion relief and "economic growth" of as little as 80c in every dollar spent. For the same price as a kilometre of road, many kilometres (potentially hundreds of kilometres depending on the location) of best practice cycleway can be built, with significant benefit from every dollar spent – estimates of benefit vary widely depending on the situation. We are in need of better return on investment tools than those currently used in transport planning. In particular, the full range of health and environmental benefits from cycling need to be considered as well as the many external costs of vehicles and roads that are currently not accounted for.

Population-wide, benefits of cycling outweigh the risks, despite the dreadful spate of recent deaths. But these events are a wake up call. Changing the built environment is central to re-balance New Zealand's transport system, support the renaissance of cycling and prevent injury deaths and disability.

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