



MEDIA RELEASE

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Large cycling study finds room for improvement to uptake

A Deakin University public health expert has called for better cycling infrastructure, traffic calming and more harmonious relationships between all road users to further increase cycling as a clean, green and healthy mode of transport.

Dr Jan Garrard, a senior lecturer with Deakin's School of Health and Social Development, has completed the largest and most comprehensive study of the motivations, supports and constraints on cycling conducted in Australia. The results point to a need for a multi-pronged approach to support and encourage cycling.

"The study highlighted a range of issues that impact on the experiences of cyclists. Until these issues are properly addressed we won't achieve the high cycling rates that other countries have achieved," Dr Garrard said.

"The benefits of cycling are well documented and have been highlighted as a means of addressing health issues, climate change and traffic congestion. However, in Australia there are still a number of barriers to making cycling an appealing mode of transport for many people."

The study was conducted by Dr Garrard and a research team from Deakin's School of Health and Social Development with support from Sport and Recreation Victoria, the Cycling Promotion Fund and Bicycle Victoria. It included an on-line survey of 2403 men and women drawn from Bicycle Victoria's database of members and contacts, as well as interviews and focus group discussions. It specifically looked at the gender differences in cycling behaviour and experiences.

"Female participation in cycling appears to be an indicator of a cycling friendly culture and environment," Dr Garrard said.

"Cross-country comparisons of gender differences in cycling show that countries with high rates of cycling for transport and recreation have few gender differences in cycling, while countries such as Australia, which have relatively low rates of cycling, particularly for transport, have large gender differences in cycling," she said.

Results of the study showed that 91 per cent of the study participants cycled for recreation, followed by 58 per cent for transport and 13 per cent for competition. Cycling for transport and recreation was the most common combination.

The majority of those who cycled for transport used roads with no bicycle facilities (83 per cent of females and 87 per cent of males) but only 6 per cent of females and 12 per cent of males actually preferred this option.

Road safety concerns and driver behaviour were more of an issue for women than men. Confidence in bike maintenance, cycling ability and cycling skills were also more of a concern for women.

The five most important constraints on cycling were lack of time, concerns about cycling in traffic, aggression from motorists, bad weather and inhaling car fumes, Dr Garrard said.

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“That the majority of these constraints were traffic related points to a need to improve cycling infrastructure and improve interactions between cyclists and motorists.

“The Copenhagen style lanes that have been installed in Swanston Street, Melbourne, and proposed for St Kilda Road, are a great development, but it will take time to establish a good network of integrated bike lanes in large cities like Melbourne. In the meantime, encouraging more patient and courteous interactions between all road users will help to make cycling safer and more enjoyable for people who cycle and those who would like to.”

Two thirds of the study participants had experienced intentional harassment from motorists or passengers. Overall, they experienced 24 incidents of harassment in a year – approximately once a fortnight.

The most frequent forms of harassment were deliberately driving too close causing fear/anxiety, shouting abuse, sounding the horn in an aggressive manner, obscene gestures and blocking the cyclist’s path.

Women found the harassment more of a constraint to cycling than men, however more men (70 per cent) than women (56 per cent) actually reported experiencing harassment.

“Intimidating behaviour by drivers can cause physical and psychological harm to cyclists and is a major barrier to people cycling, however it has received little attention in cycling promotion in Australia,” Dr Garrard said.

“Separating motorists and cyclists through improved cycling infrastructure is important, but so is what cycling experts call ‘invisible infrastructure’ such as speed limits, traffic calming, and safe driving and cycling behaviour.

“International comparisons and annual AAMI surveys show that Australia has a fairly aggressive driving culture. Safer and more courteous driving and cycling will benefit all road users.

“A multi-pronged approach is needed that raises public awareness of the value of sharing the road among all road users, provides education and skills for cyclists and motorists, and provides an incident reporting system such as the EPA system for reporting littering and smoky vehicles.”

Ends

Jan Garrard is available for interview.

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