

Destroying Travel Myths, Mayer Hillman, June 2000

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DESTROYING TRAVEL MYTHS: "It's not safe to walk and cycle"

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The overall reduction in serious injuries on roads in Britain over the last 30 years has been impressive. Examination of the means by which this has been brought about would appear to suggest that the government's new targets on casualty reduction are more likely to be met by supporting a continuation of the trend of people making fewer of their journeys by the vulnerable modes - foot and cycle - and far more by the apparently very much safer forms of travel – car and bus. The findings of successive National Travel Surveys over this period reflect the remarkable rate with which this change has occurred.

Certainly from the viewpoint of road casualty figures, it's not safe to walk or cycle. The risk of being killed or seriously injured is, not at all surprisingly, much higher than when travelling within the protective body of a motor vehicle, ideally one which annual tests reveal deliver the highest chance of survival in the event of a collision.

Whilst there are marked variations for each mode by age and gender, they are relatively small in relation to other modes. Published statistics show that, compared with travel in a car, walking is about 17 times as likely to lead to death or serious injury and, compared with bus travel, 45 times as likely. The ratios would be greater if casualty figures were revised to reflect the under-reporting of casualties to pedestrians and falls on the pavement. They would be much higher still if pedestrians did not exercise increasing vigilance in the face of the rising danger from traffic, did not detour to safer locations to cross roads, and, if pedestrian casualty numbers only took account of mileage when crossing roads.

For travel by cycle, the equivalent ratios death and serious injury in relation to that by car and bus travel are 27 times and 72 times higher, again excluding the effects of the considerable under-reporting of cyclists' casualties. These ratios would probably be markedly higher were it not for the fact that most of the, by definition, less experienced 23 million cycle owners in this country do not use their bicycles much owing to a fear of injury in a collision with a motor vehicle.

There are several profound reasons for questioning the validity of these stark ratios and for proposing a reversal of the process of making fewer trips on foot and cycle. A more informed understanding of relevant issues based on a broader appraisal of its effects can lead to altogether different conclusions about the direction that policy should take.

The first reason is that this narrow analysis of the casualty figures overlooks a fundamental failure of current policy. It is now becoming widely accepted that changes in the number of casualties are an insufficient measure of road safety. Nevertheless, policy makers and practitioners in the sphere of road safety continue to rely on these changes as the primary, if not sole, indicator of success or failure. Nearly all targets for so-called improvements in road safety are set in relation to reducing injury rather than decreasing danger. Only two months ago, the Prime Minister referred to our remarkable success in reducing road casualties and the fact that we now have one of the best records in Europe. He made no mention of safety. The response on this from most road safety professionals is now, at long last, to acknowledge the limitations of this traditional way of evaluating progress but to go on pleading that no complementary indicators exist. It is as if their urgent derivation is not really critical and does not represent a key deficiency of policy.

The consequence of failure to act on this is borne most heavily by children whose casualty rate in the last 25 years has roughly halved. But this otherwise desirable outcome has been achieved in the main by reducing children's exposure to danger, in the process, obliging them to forego the basic freedom of independent travel, with damaging impacts on their physical and social development.

The second reason for concern relates to the focus in policy on the protection of what I have been calling for some years road user inmates (of vehicles) rather than the road user outmates (pedestrians and cyclists), and not differentiating between the two sets of mates. Again, it is as if the protection of offender and victim is deserving of like consideration. This is unjustified: even on the questionable assumption that in collisions between a car and a pedestrian, both driver and pedestrian are equally to blame, vehicle drivers are far more often associated with the serious injury or death of pedestrians and cyclists than the reverse. Indeed, 97% of pedestrians and cyclists are killed or seriously injured as a result of a collision with a motor vehicle – mainly cars. From this perspective, far from it being not safe to walk or cycle, it is clearly highly dangerous to drive.

In these circumstances, it seems to be morally indefensible for the motor industry and those who regulate its products to invest more on minimising injury to inmates than outmates. Yet, the latest European New Car Assessment Programme report notes that cars, especially small ones, are becoming significantly safer for the occupants but that little progress has been made in providing better pedestrian protection. It seems indefensible too in the event of a collision with a cyclist or pedestrian to cite contributory negligence where preventive action such as wearing light coloured clothing at night or donning a safety helmet has not been taken to minimise risk of injury. As an analogy, it is as if Stephen Lawrence had a part to play in his own death by not wearing a metal vest or carrying a knife to protect himself given that he must have been aware of the fact that he was more likely than a white teenager to be a victim of assault.

Further grounds for caution on the issue of relative safety stem from the obvious observation that there is little intrinsically dangerous about cycling or walking. This becomes apparent by comparing the outcome of policy for cyclists in this country with that where much more investment has been made to minimise cyclists' risk of injury: the cycle fatality rate per kilometre in the Netherlands is only a third and, in Denmark, only a quarter of that in Britain.

The removal of blinkers is required to appreciate the third reason for questioning the direction of public policy on protecting the population from largely avoidable injury. Whilst in no way wishing to diminish the significance of fatal and serious injuries among pedestrians and cyclists, it is salutary to note that the risk of death is only one for every 28 million kilometres cycled and only one for every 32 million kilometres walked. When these figures are related to the risk of death from poor levels of physical fitness (notably those leading to heart disease) - for which cycling and walking are ideal preventive activities as they can often be readily tied into the routine of daily life - an altogether different judgement emerges on risk.

In one section of the report I wrote for the British Medical Association on the health benefits of cycling and risk of injury when doing so, I established that about 20 life years were gained in longevity through the improved fitness from regular cycling for every life year lost when cycling even on UK roads which are, in the main, so unsafe for cycling. From this, the report concluded that, far from it being inadvisable to cycle owing to the increased risk of fatal injury, it is inadvisable not to cycle owing to the increased risk of death from heart disease in particular – except perhaps for that small minority of people who have the motivation and are able to adopt an alternative fitness regime in their leisure lives.

The fourth reason for questioning the relevance of statistics on the relative dangers of cycling and walking stems from the issue of casualty migration. Whilst the impressive reduction in child casualties in the last 30 years has been credited to this policy, closer examination of the figures confirms the hypothesis that if children are denied opportunities in their early years for acquiring traffic coping skills when walking and cycling on their own, they are more at risk in their teenage years as they have less experience to fall back on.

What three key conclusions can be drawn from the above analysis about the direction for future policy on the currently high risk of injury when cycling and walking?

First, to complement the attention paid to road safety education, engineering and enforcement, policy needs to focus far more on reducing traffic volume - the prime source of danger - as well as speed and acceleration.

Second, cyclists need safe networks, not necessarily exclusive to them but certainly with low and properly enforced speed limits on them. And pedestrians need a continuous network uninterrupted at road crossings to give them priority over vehicles at intersections other than those on main roads.

Third, professionals working in this domain must be persuaded that they cannot go on ignoring the pertinence of the fact that the reduction of road casualties and road danger are not synonymous objectives simply because that would require them to eat humble pie.

We have a right to expect valid research rather than a wish to avoid acknowledging this error of judgement. Only in this way will the twin objectives of road casualty and road danger reduction be delivered - as well as the wide-ranging social, economic, environmental and ecological benefits of prioritising travel in favour of cyclists and pedestrians.

References

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