

# BAR BULLETIN

## *The Risks and Rewards of Bike Commuting*

**By Bob Anderton**

In this article I will discuss the risks and the too often ignored rewards of bike commuting in an attempt to convince you, dear Bar Bulletin reader, to commute by bicycle.

More than 20 years ago, the British Medical Association calculated a 20-to-one benefit-to-risk ratio for bicycling and concluded that, “in spite of the hostile environment in which most cyclists currently ride, the benefits in terms of health promotion and longevity far outweigh the loss of life years in injury on the roads. This peer-reviewed study found that, statistically, riders were rewarded with 20 years of life gained while risking one year of life lost.”<sup>1</sup>

More recent academic studies have found reward-to-risk ratios ranging between nine-to-one and 96-to-one. A 2012 multidisciplinary review of these studies concluded, “there is a large net health benefit of increased cycling, since the risk of fatal injury is greatly outweighed by the reductions in mortality afforded by increased physical activity. Air pollution risks and benefits had smaller impacts in either direction.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite these statistics, many people think riding a bike in an urban environment is just too dangerous. The amount of risk depends, however, on where one rides. Seattle is relatively safe compared to other U.S. cities, but as Jane E. Brody recently reported in *The New York Times*, “Per kilometer and per trip cycled, American bicyclists are twice as likely to get killed as German cyclists

and over three times as likely as Dutch cyclists.”<sup>3</sup>

Several factors influence why it is much safer to ride in many European countries than in the U.S. Better bike infrastructure is key — things like physically protected bike lanes and 30-km speed limits (18.6 mph) on residential streets. But it is also the case that, because more people ride there, people driving expect to see cyclists so fewer collisions occur per mile (or kilometer). Finally, it’s worth noting that most European countries have strict liability laws for drivers who collide with bicyclists, so drivers there are especially motivated to prevent crashes.

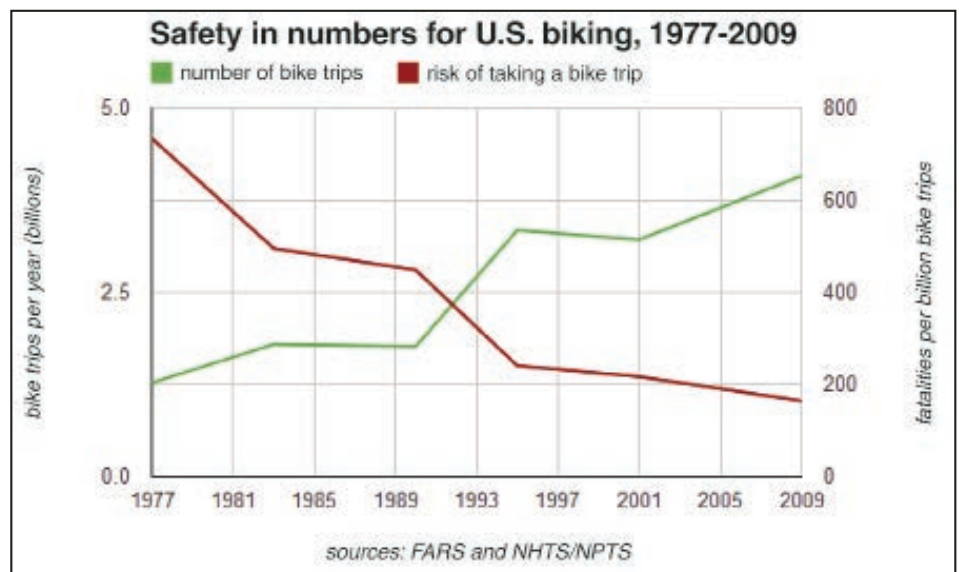
In the last few years, more people have been riding bicycles in the U.S. Nationwide, from 2000 to 2014, bicycle commuting has grown 62 percent.<sup>4</sup> More

people riding automatically makes it safer to ride. A recent study by P.L. Jacobson published in the journal *Injury Prevention*<sup>5</sup> found that collision rates decline with increases in people walking or bicycling.

The study concluded, “Since it is unlikely that the people walking and bicycling become more cautious if their numbers are larger, it indicates that the behavior of motorists controls the likelihood of collisions with people walking and bicycling. It appears that motorists adjust their behavior in the presence of people walking and bicycling.”

The chart below from the organization People for Bikes<sup>6</sup> illustrates that there really is safety in numbers.

Cascade Bicycle Club claims that bike commuting in Seattle has increased 152 percent since 2000.<sup>7</sup> According to the



---

Seattle Bike Blog, the Fremont Bridge bike counter recorded 8.5 percent more people riding in 2014 than in 2013.<sup>8</sup> So far this year, the bike counter on the West Seattle Bridge counted 14,617 more riders than in the same period in 2014.<sup>9</sup> The Fremont Bridge count is actually lower than in 2014, but it still has recorded more than 800,000 trips so far this year, which is almost four times the number over the West Seattle Bridge.<sup>10</sup> More bike commuters make for safer commutes.

The biggest risk for bike commuters is getting hit by a car. When this happens, drivers too often say that the bicyclist “came out of nowhere.” This victim-blaming is why I’ve been working to update our rules of the road. Drivers involved in collisions with pedestrians or bicyclists should be presumed to be civilly liable. Improved driver’s education and this legal presumption would empower and motivate those most able to prevent collisions to do so.

A presumption of liability would not just make our streets safer, it would be fairer. A driver could still prove that a bicyclist was at fault for a crash by, for instance, not having a headlight at night on a dark street. Yet, such a presumption would mean that bicyclists who are taken to hospitals before police arrive would no longer routinely be blamed by drivers and then ticketed, or have their cases dismissed on summary judgment if they are unable to recall how their collisions occurred.

The League of American Bicyclists ranks Washington as the most bike-friendly state in the nation.<sup>11</sup> Our state should lead the way in updating our rules of the road to make our streets safer for everyone. Such legislation would help more people feel safe enough to start commuting by bike ... like you.

So, how do you stay safe for now? Use protected bike facilities if possible. Seattle is expanding this network, but we have a long way to go, both in building the facilities and in educating people on how to safely use them.

In 2014, The Seattle Times reported, “Among large U.S. cities, Seattle has the second-lowest fatality rate for pedestrians and cyclists.” Reporter Gene Balk wrote, “While Seattle’s stats may be envious, more can be done to improve

pedestrian and cyclist safety here.”<sup>12</sup> He was right. Balk was recently hit while bicycling on Seattle’s new “protected” bike lane on Second Avenue.<sup>13</sup> A driver made an illegal left turn through the bike lane and “left hooked” him.<sup>14</sup>

My personal plan for bicycling safely is to be as visible as possible, while never assuming that drivers actually see me. It continues to amaze me how many drivers are navigating urban streets while fiddling with their phones. All the neon clothes and blinky lights from REI can’t compete against the blue glow of a Facebook feed.

A headlight is only legally required when it’s dark out, but front and rear bike lights can be helpful during the day as well.<sup>15</sup> Some riders swear by strobe lights, but other riders, pedestrians and drivers often swear at those who use them. If you notice that your lights bother others, it’s best to use a different setting.

I have a bell that I use to warn pedestrians when I ride on sidewalks or shared trails, but when an SUV is about to run me down I use my voice and yell “STOP!” By the way, it is legal to ride on sidewalks in Seattle — sidewalk riders are required to give an audible signal before passing pedestrians and a bell is friendlier and less confusing to many people than the phrase popular among wearers of Lycra, “ON YOUR LEFT!”<sup>16</sup> I recommend getting a nice bell and saying “excuse me.”

Bike helmets are a required accessory everywhere in King County, though wearing one does risk altering your hairdo.<sup>17</sup> There are many competing statistics on the efficacy of helmets. Certainly they can reduce the risk of head injury if you crash and hit your head. On the other hand, failure to wear a helmet does not make you more likely to crash, and a helmet only helps if you hit your head.

I’ve had a helmet-wearing client die from head injuries and I’ve represented many more who crashed but didn’t wear helmets or hit their heads. Still, I always wear a helmet on my commute and even have one with built-in lights. It’s not just the law, it’s a good idea.

Exercise has its rewards, but my personal experience with most forms of exercise is that the best feeling comes when I stop. Riding a bike is one form

of exercise that is rewarding as it happens. Not only is it fun, it’s real exercise. A study in The British Journal of Sports Medicine found that bicycle commuting burns an average of 540 calories per hour.<sup>18</sup> That’s an average, but you can burn more or less depending on your schedule and level of energy. Never mind spending time after work at a health club, bike commuting gets you where you need to go while providing exercise and (most of the time) stress relief.

You can save money by bike commuting even if you don’t sell your car or quit your health club. While car ownership has fixed costs that don’t change if you commute by bike, variable costs such as fuel, maintenance and parking are reduced or eliminated. Monthly parking downtown alone costs about \$300, which is similar to the cost of buying a basic bike.

Despite what car advertisements portray, dense urban environments don’t really work for cars. When was the last time you had fun driving to work? How about parking? Riding is simply more enjoyable than driving and, when traffic is really bad, it will often be faster. If you can route your commute through a park or use protected bike facilities, you’ll enjoy your ride even more.

We are now entering the rainy season and there is more than a risk of rain. Many bicyclists are fair weather riders. If you are just starting out, you might want to wait for a dry day, but once you are familiar with urban riding, don’t let the rain hold you back. Bike fenders help.

While some people like their Lycra, you don’t need special cycling clothing to ride to work. However, bike-specific rain pants will make a ride in the rain much better. Most of these are black with reflective piping; so, if you use your imagination, they look a bit like a tuxedo. More importantly, they keep you dry. You can get bike-specific rain jackets, but any rain jacket (especially one with pit-zips) should work well enough for Seattle’s typically light rain.

There are certainly risks to bike commuting, but the rewards far outweigh the risks. If you are nervous to start, ask a neighbor or co-worker to ride with you. If you are the bicycling pioneer in your community and don’t have anyone to

---

ask, check with Cascade Bike Club for commute buddy suggestions or sign up for an Urban Cycling Class.<sup>19</sup>

---

*Bob Anderton founded Washington Bike Law in 2000 and has been representing injured people since 1992. In 2009, Washington Bike Law was the first law office in the country to be named a Bike-Friendly Business by the League of American Bicyclists. Washington Bike Law and the City of Seattle both currently have Gold-Level awards from the Bike League. Anderton can be reached at 206-262-9290 or bob@washingtonbikelaw.com.*

Health and Safety,” Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1992.

<sup>2</sup> “Bicycling: Health Risk or Benefit?” Kay Teschke, Conor C.O. Reynolds, Francis J. Ries, Brian Gouge, Meghan Winters, UBC Medical Journal: [www.ubcmj.com/pdf/ubcmj\\_3\\_2\\_2012\\_6-11.pdf](http://www.ubcmj.com/pdf/ubcmj_3_2_2012_6-11.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> [http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/cycling-101-neednt-be-collision-course/?\\_r=0](http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/09/21/cycling-101-neednt-be-collision-course/?_r=0)

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.citylab.com/commute/2015/10/bike-commuting-still-on-the-rise/408679/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://injuryprevention.bmj.com/content/9/3/205.short>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.peopleforbikes.org/blog/entry/actually-biking-has-been-getting-dramatically-safer-as-americans-ride-more>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.cascade.org/node/6902>

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.seattlebikeblog.com/2015/04/10/2015-fremont-bridge-bike-counts-have-broken-records-every-month-so-far/>

<sup>9</sup> Comparing 239,365 riders from January 1 to October 7, 2014, to 253,982 riders from January 1 to October 7, 2015: [http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/bikecounter\\_spokane.htm](http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/bikecounter_spokane.htm).

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/bikecounter\\_fremont.htm](http://www.seattle.gov/transportation/bikecounter_fremont.htm)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.bikeleague.org/content/ranking>

<sup>12</sup> <http://blogs.seattletimes.com/fyi-guy/2014/04/18/seattle-ranks-no-2-for-cyclist-and-pedestrian-safety/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://twitter.com/genebalk/status/648655892519370752>

<sup>14</sup> <https://twitter.com/genebalk/status/648657936386945024>

<sup>15</sup> RCW § 46.61.780 requires bike lighting during the “hours of darkness.” This is defined as beginning “a half hour after sunset.” RCW § 46.37.020.

<sup>16</sup> SMC 11.44.120.

<sup>17</sup> King County Health Code Section 9.10.010.

<sup>18</sup> Br. J. Sports Med. 2007;41:8-12, “Determining the intensity and energy expenditure during commuter cycling,” B. de Geus, *et al.*: <http://bjsm.bmj.com/content/41/1/8.short>.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.cascade.org/node/20090>

---

<sup>1</sup> British Medical Association, “Cycling: Towards