



Strengthening Cycling Laws for Safer Roads

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Though some of the most high-risk road users in the U.S. are cyclists, current U.S. traffic and cycling laws are not sufficient in protecting cyclists. In recent years cycling has increased as a means of transport, recreation, and sustainability, yet thousands of cyclists are injured or killed every year. In this policy brief, we argue that stronger cycling-related laws are crucial to reducing injuries and fatalities, including increased penalties for drivers who endanger cyclists, clear passing-distance requirements, and increasing enforcement.

II. OVERVIEW

Cycling is a sustainable, inexpensive, and healthy form of transportation that benefits individuals, public health, wellness, as well as the environment. Nevertheless, cyclists are disproportionately endangered on the road. In 2022 alone, more than 1,000 cyclists were killed in crashes involving motor vehicles, and many more cyclists sustained injuries that changed their lives. These crashes are not accidents; they are preventable with better legal protections for cyclists. In much of the United States, there are outdated, poorly enforced, or simply insufficient

laws that govern cycling safety. For instance, while laws in some states require drivers to allow cyclists at least three feet when passing them, studies reveal that these rules are often violated, and, even when they are not, hardly anyone is cited for violating them. There is a pressing need to institute a legal structure that elevates cyclist safety in order to enhance safety for everyone.

A. Relevance

Road traffic injuries are the number one cause of death for those ages 5 to 29 globally, according to the World Health Organization. In the U.S., although cyclists represent just a small minority of all commuters, they comprise an out-sized percentage of traffic deaths. Making cycling laws stronger is a question of saving lives, and also encouraging more cycling, which decreases greenhouse gas emissions, traffic congestion, and health costs associated with sedentary lifestyles.

III. HISTORY

A. Current Stances

Historically, the United States has trailed behind the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany when it comes to cycling laws and protections, which have resulted in many fewer deaths in those countries. The “three-foot passing laws” that are established in the U.S. have not led to much of an effect because of lack of enforcement and vague language. Also, the penalties for drivers who

injure or kill a cyclist are typically mild in comparison to the extent of their actions. Drivers frequently only receive small fines or a brief license suspension period when they harm cyclists, and in some cases when they have killed cyclists as well. The weak penalties send a message that cyclists are less valued on the road and may not actively encourage safer driving habits.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

Each day, cyclists represent one of the stakeholder groups as they face risks on their daily commutes, or on leisure rides. Another stakeholder group includes motor vehicle operators as the cycling laws may accurately clarify legal rights and responsibilities in the context of a cycling accident. Local government, state department of transportation, and law enforcement are all stakeholder groups as they implement, and are involved in the management and enforcement of safer boards. Public health advocates and environmental advocates are also stakeholder groups, when it comes to cycling, because cycling contributes to clean air and healthier communities as far as environmental factors.

B. Risks of Indifference

The ongoing lack of stronger cycling legislation perpetuates preventable injuries and fatalities and discourages people from choosing cycling as a mode of transportation. This serves to not only undermine sustainability objectives but contributes to healthcare system and emergency response system demands. Continued neglect of the legal protection of cyclists will exacerbate automobile dependency and congestion, further degrading air quality and livability in cities. Furthermore, injuries sustained by cyclists that are

met with no consequences for the offending party, erode trust in the judicial process and make it much more difficult to effect change towards a safer transportation network in the future.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

- A) **Economic Efficiency:** Safer cycling reduces crashes and healthcare costs, while encouraging affordable commuting.
- B) **Environmental Sustainability:** More cyclists mean fewer cars, lower emissions, and progress toward California's climate targets.
- C) **Public Health Benefits:** Regular cycling lowers obesity, heart disease, and stress, while safer roads encourage more people to ride.

V. TRIED POLICY

California's 3 Feet for Safety Act (2014) was an exciting move forward that required drivers to provide three feet of space for cyclists when passing them. Unfortunately, enforcement has been insufficient and there is little public awareness, resulting in very few citations for violations and a lack of knowledge of the law and its requirements by many drivers. Additionally, in the event a driver injures or even kills a cyclist, the penalty is often inconsistent and minimal and is certainly not enough to deter dangerous driving behavior. Alternatively, several European countries including the Netherlands have established "strict liability" laws that automatically hold a driver responsible for a crash involving a cyclist, unless the cyclist is also at fault. With these laws, death and serious injury rates are lower and cyclists also enjoy greater respect on

the road. These examples only contribute to the notion that policy alone, without penalties or accountability and enforcement, does not provide protections for cyclists.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

Strengthen Enforcement of Passing-Distance Laws

- Equip law enforcement with dashcams and sensor-based systems to detect and record unsafe passing.
- Increase fines and license penalties for violating safe passing laws.
- Launch statewide public education campaigns to raise awareness about cyclists' rights and visibility.

Mandate Protected Bike Infrastructure in High-Risk Areas

- Require protected bike lanes in all new or renovated road projects within urban centers and high-traffic corridors.
- Prioritize areas with high cyclist injury or fatality rates.
- Leverage federal and state transportation safety grants to fund infrastructure improvements.

Standardize Penalties for Reckless Driving Involving Cyclists

- Implement uniform statewide sentencing guidelines for motorists who injure or kill cyclists.
- Treat negligent acts involving vulnerable road users as aggravated offenses.
- Encourage restorative justice programs where offenders engage in cyclist-safety education and community service.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Cycling is a critical factor for a healthier, sustainable, and more engaged California. However, cyclists are unprotected under antiquated, ineffectively enforced laws. Revising laws related to cycling, especially by enforcing the distance laws for passing, road design laws, and stricter penalties on negligent erratic driving, can significantly decrease fatalities and other preventable injuries.

By focusing on the safety of cyclists, California can lead the country in road design that is workable for all people and respect, sustainability, and responsibility on our streets in our street culture.

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