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BARRIERS TO BIKING FOR WOMEN AND MINORITIES

A NITC project seeks to understand perspectives of marginalized cyclists and how transportation professionals can foster a more inclusive cycling culture.

The Issue

The health benefits of bicycling are well understood; numerous studies link increased cycling activity with improved health outcomes. Research suggests that the cycling behavior most likely to generate broad, population-level health benefits is everyday routine cycling—including running errands and taking other short trips. Despite these health benefits and new investment in cycling infrastructure, overall cycling levels in the U.S. lag behind many other nations. Amidst findings of increased ridership, research still finds that women and racial minorities are underrepresented as cyclists in North America.

While quantitative data have revealed estimates of these disparities, little is known about the motivations or deterrents experienced by individuals. This report draws from 28 in-depth interviews with women and minorities in Portland, Oregon, to clarify ongoing barriers to bicycling that prevent those who own a bike (and are thus not limited strictly by economic barriers) from becoming more routine cyclists.

The Research

Amy Lubitow, a professor of sociology at Portland State University, conducted the study that interviewed 28 Portlanders. The primary aim of the project was to collect rich, narrative data regarding obstacles to routine or utilitarian cycling for women and minorities who already see biking as a viable form of transportation, but who make relatively few bike trips. Lubitow chose participants who own a bike and ride it at least once a month, but not more than once a week. The interviews yielded a wealth of perspectives. For women in the study, riding a bike could oscillate between being empowering

THE ISSUE

Despite the health benefits of utilitarian cycling, significant deterrents to cycling remain, particularly for women and minorities.

THE RESEARCH

This research explored:

- The experiences of women bicycling as reported in interviews;
- The experiences of ethnic minorities bicycling as reported in interviews;
- Potential interventions that could address some of the barriers they face.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings suggest that efforts to increase diversity in bike ridership must acknowledge the unique challenges experienced by marginalized groups.

Photo: Cyclists in Portland, Oregon

in one moment and stressful or frightening in the next. On one hand, they might experience a sense of agency with the speed that a bike provides for escaping perceived or blatant threats, while on the other hand they often reporting feelings of anxiety and fear due to the fact that, as a woman on a bike, they were noticeable in public spaces.

Of the 28 participants included in this report, 18 identified as a racial or ethnic minority. Many people of color reported feeling anxiety regarding systemic forms of racism. These issues ranged from concerns about police violence to challenges in maneuvering through public spaces. As a result of this anxiety, some individuals reported curbing their cycling habits. Based on the insights gained from their stories, Lubitow came up with a set of recommended interventions for planners to mitigate the barriers this group experiences.

Implications

The problems of systemic racism, sexism and violence against minorities do not have easy answers. There are, however, certain concrete steps that planners and other transportation professionals can take to address these problems. This project highlights the various mechanisms that can deter women and minorities from engaging in more routine cycling behaviors. Their narratives can be used to help understand how gender and racial oppression may contribute to lower rates of cycling amongst women and minorities in Portland. Given the consistent pattern of fear, anxiety and stress that women and minorities reported encountering when navigating public spaces, additional support must be given to cultivate and maintain a diverse biking population.

Safety	Increased lighting and wayfinding, inclusion of more protected lanes
Increased Visibility & Harassment	Women's group rides; "bike buddy" programs to support riders or additional women's biking groups; bystander invention training
Appearance	Increased availability of bike lockers, showers
Parenting	Events to support families; trainings or classes about utility bikes and adapting bikes for carrying heavier loads; infrastructure adaptations that meet the needs of utility bikes or trailers
Racism & Racial Profiling	Reform of police practices and policies; efforts to reduce institutional racism
Invisibility of People of Color	Increase ridership amongst diverse groups to reduce heightened visibility of minorities; possibly through a "bike buddy" program; increased lighting, signage or protected bike lanes to increase feelings of safety for minorities deterred from biking due to aggressive driving and cycling behaviors; more cycling events and organizations run by, and for, people of color; signage and advertisements for bike events and organizations should be more diverse
White Bike Culture and Discrimination in Bike Shops	Education and training programs that reduce racial bias; naming and calling out white privilege; diverse and inclusive trainings and classes to support interested cyclists
Intersecting Identities: Class, Ability	Additional programming to support the needs of low-income individuals; additional training or information on repairing and maintaining a bicycle; increased access to low-cost bikeshare memberships; additional consideration about infrastructure needs of persons with disabilities who may ride alternative types of cycles

Suggested Interventions

Issues are shown in the left-hand column, with suggested interventions on the right. Some are complex and relate to institutional oppression. Others are smaller and more easily implemented. Building a diverse cycling community in Portland will require both.

Interventions need to create opportunities for women and people of color to be integrated into local cycling organizations, and they have to consider the complex array of barriers and challenges minorities and women experience. The findings from this report suggest that barriers for marginalized cyclists range from concerns about infrastructure limitations to overt racial and gender discrimination experienced while riding. Data also shed light on the unique social position of mothers, who often face challenges transporting children. These findings suggest that cycling mobilities are critically linked to intersecting and overlapping identities, and that efforts to increase diversity in bike ridership must acknowledge the unique challenges experienced by marginalized groups.

PROJECT INFORMATION

TITLE: Narratives of Marginalized Cyclists: Understanding Obstacles to Utilitarian Cycling Among Women and Minorities in Portland, Oregon

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MORE INFORMATION
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