

What does bike helmet law really do?

Published: **February 10, 2012 8:00 AM**

Having lived for a quarter of a century in the Netherlands – where nobody had ever told me I should wear a helmet when riding my bike – I have an opinion on this, and I'm quite happy to share it with you.

Like any Dutch kid in the '60s and '70s, I always just happily pedaled along helmetless, enjoying my freedom and independence, and totally oblivious to the dangers supposedly lurking around every turn in the road.

Even now, with so much more traffic on the roads, most Dutch still ride their bikes without wearing helmets. In fact, as long as you're not a serious road cyclist going 40 km/h, you'd look pretty silly wearing one.

The Dutch obviously feel quite safe on a bike.

When the Dutch were rebuilding the country after the Second World War, and the country quickly became more prosperous, huge investments were made in car infrastructure. Old city squares were transformed into parking lots, buildings were demolished, and sometimes bike infrastructure was removed, to make way for wider roads to improve traffic flow.

Contrary to expectations, congestion worsened, and the result was that the roads became more dangerous, and towns and cities were in danger of losing their hearts and souls.

In the early 1950s, there were about 1,000 traffic deaths annually in the Netherlands (population in 1950 was about 10 million).

In the early '70s, the number of fatalities had more than tripled, and a lot of the victims were children.

People had had enough by then, and there were big demonstrations. People were occupying the streets with their bikes, carrying signs like: "Stop the child murder."

The oil crisis in the early '70s led to car-free Sundays, which reminded people what streets used to be like before the cars took over.

In the next decade, policies started to change. Politicians and planners started to get serious about providing alternatives to the car, and investments shifted towards cycling and transit.

The results have been astonishing.

On average, about a quarter of trips in the Netherlands now are made by bicycle, while traffic deaths have dropped dramatically: in 2010, 640 people were killed in traffic accidents in the Netherlands (2010 population, 16.6 million).

Notably, the helmet issue was never raised, because the Dutch knew that many people would give up cycling if they would have to start wearing helmets. It can be inconvenient, uncomfortable, and it would make cycling look like a dangerous activity.

There are huge benefits of high rates of cycling. One is that car/cyclist accident rates are dramatically lower than when few people cycle, because drivers are used to looking out for cyclists.

Another is that the savings in health care spending are considerable, since rates of diseases caused by a sedentary life style – such as hypertension, Type 2 diabetes, heart disease, depression and others – are much lower.

Unfortunately, over the years we have engineered exercise out of our lives, with devastating consequences for our children, who now mostly rely on us to get from point A to point B, while we pollute the air they breathe with our gas-guzzling SUVs.

Our sprawl addiction has resulted in more and faster driving and this inevitably leads to an increased risk of death or injury.

Our children are at significantly higher risk than the rest of us, both as drivers and as vulnerable road users such as pedestrians and cyclists.

We're also seeing a childhood obesity epidemic – with 26 per cent of children and youth (1.6 million children) considered overweight or obese.

As a consequence, our children are likely to live shorter lives and suffer myriad health problems throughout their lives.

And nobody organizes a big, angry demonstration: enough is enough. Instead, we get angry at cyclists who don't wear helmets, because they get in our way so we have to slow down.

To put things into perspective, Transport Canada reported in 2010 that cyclists account for about two per cent of traffic fatalities, which means that about 60 cyclists die in bicycle/car collisions annually.

Note that UBC researchers found in the Cycling in Cities study that Canadian cyclists are three times more likely to be killed and 30 times more likely to have serious injuries than cyclists in the Netherlands (even when they don't wear helmets, and a lot of us do).

Consider this: in Canada, about 21,000 lives were lost prematurely in 1995 because of inactivity.

Another interesting estimate in a University of Toronto study is that about \$2.1 billion, or 2.5 per cent of the total direct health care costs in Canada, was attributable to physical inactivity in 1999.

Add to that the cost of loss of productivity due to death or disability resulting from inactivity, and you arrive at a cost to society of our sedentary lifestyles of a staggering \$30 billion annually.

Back to the history lesson: in North America, car culture was well established in the '70s, North American politicians and planners continued to focus on cars for mobility. Cyclists were told that separated bike paths were dangerous, and they were safer sharing the roads with cars. Cyclists to this day are made to believe that, as long as they wear their helmets and make sure they are visible by wearing reflective vests and using lights, they'll be just fine. It seems this approach hasn't been very effective, because our cycling rates have remained around one per cent of all trips for several decades.

The helmet issue seems to distract us from the real issue, which is that our infrastructure needs to be made safer, more pleasant, more direct and more inviting for cyclists.

Unfortunately, this fact is often overshadowed by discussions and opinions on the helmet issue, which are most often based on emotions.

A helmet doesn't prevent a crash. A non-head injury can also be devastating and have life-changing consequences, and often be fatal.

Also, helmets are only made for low-speed impacts. A helmet will provide adequate protection to the head if someone falls off a bike and hits his head on the pavement, but helmets are not made for collisions with moving cars.

In a collision with a car moving at 48 km/h – the speed legally allowed on pretty much all our streets – a cyclist will have a 55 per cent chance of survival.

At 64 km/h – which is probably below the average car speed on Lougheed Highway – it's only 15 per cent.

A helmet is going to provide only marginal protection.

We need to decide what our goals are and how we can achieve them. Do we want more people to bike? Do we want less fatalities and injuries among cyclists – and pedestrians? Do we want to encourage active transportation as part of a healthier lifestyle?

Once we've determined what our goals are, we should be focussing on what has shown to be successful. It's clear that our focus on helmets as the solution so far hasn't resulted in better safety.

There is a lot to learn from places where cycling rates are much higher and accident rates are much lower than in our communities. Providing a safer environment for cyclists is key, and will do a lot more for safety of all road users than a helmet law ever will.

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