



Focus group research on cycling

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The Journal has previously reported¹ the quantitative data used in the development of the successful 'Cycle Instead' cycling promotion project in Western Australia. Qualitative research was also undertaken to explore in more depth people's thoughts and perceptions about cycling in Perth. These data are now reported here.

The overall objective of this qualitative research was to examine the salience and attitudes towards issues around transport and cycling.² The information was to be used to maximise the effectiveness of mass media messages being developed to promote cycling among a positively predisposed, but non-cycling, population segment.

Thirty-five participants aged 20-55 were recruited by a private research company, which applied quotas to ensure a mix of participants across a range of demographic variables (age, gender, family structure, etc). Respondents who were not cyclists were asked further questions so as to allocate them to one of five groupings:

- People who owned a bike but used it only occasionally (once or twice in previous three months).
- People who rode their bikes irregularly (less often than once every three months).
- Parents of children who own bikes but who do not let their children ride to school.
- People who did not own a bike but have a positive attitude towards cycling in general.
- Lapsed cyclists who used to ride regularly but no longer do. (Those who had stopped riding only because of the compulsory wearing of helmets were excluded from the qualitative research as we were studying the broad view of barriers to cycling.)

The telephone interviewer invited those who indicated they were willing to take part in a focus group session on transport issues.

The group discussions, which were video taped, were very structured in format and lasted one-and-a-half hours. The facilitator, experienced in conducting such groups, began the session with questions about transport issues in general that were opened up for discussion among the group. As the discussion progressed, cycling issues were raised by the facilitator and a number of pre-determined questions were put to the group for discussion.

Analysis of the tapes was conducted by noting the range of issues raised by the participants, the degree of consistency of issues being raised and the extent to which others in the group agreed with the problems and solutions.

The primary cycling-related issues of concern among all groups were the inadequacy of cycle-ways and lack of acknowledgement by motorists. A range of other issues was raised such as poor weather, and parents had their own concerns about attacks on their children by dogs and bicycle theft.

The qualities of cycling most liked by all groups were those with personal benefits – exercise, fitness and health. The chance to get outdoors in fresh air, less stressful than driving and parents enjoying the opportunity for family interaction were other consistently mentioned benefits.

The principal reasons for parents not allowing their children to ride to school were busy roads and the volume of traffic on them, including the number of other parents not driving with care in the vicinity of the school while dropping off their own children. Other barriers discussed were the lack of bicycle

education among children, that they were legally not supposed to ride on the footpath, and a fear of strangers or 'weirdos' approaching children.

The principal barriers to cycling among the other groups were infrastructure or commuting related. Infrastructure complaints included the lack of cycle-ways, cycle lanes on roads and poor maintenance of cycle-ways. Comments were made about the design of roads being for cars and footpaths for pedestrians, leaving cyclists unsure about their place in the road scheme.

Barriers to commuting were the long distances caused by the urban sprawl and that the road networks and car parks, being designed for cars, made it easier to just drive. Lack of shower and bike storage facilities were also perceived to be a major barrier to commuting. Commuting barriers, such as carrying capacity and time pressure, were generally perceived to be more difficult to overcome than barriers to recreational cycling, such as pedestrians on the shared path and poor weather.

Suggested initiatives to promote cycling included adult retraining courses, helmet rebates, vehicle registration discounts for cycling commuters and the use of mass media for promoting the benefits of cycling. Parents were reasonably keen to see more road rules and bicycle education in schools.

A strongly perceived desire for more information on cycle routes for the public was evident. Using 'calls to the greater good' to promote cycling, such as reduced pollution and fossil fuel consumption, would not appear to be particularly powerful.

This research confirms the safety and infrastructure concerns highlighted in the quantitative findings. However, it has also indicated that there may be a strong demand for information among those who are positively predisposed to cycling. This may be especially important in areas where infrastructure has been recently developed or upgraded. Furthermore, there may be more to be gained from promoting recreational cycling only to non-cyclists as the barriers to this are perceived to be easier to overcome. A separate message could then be developed to encourage recreational cyclists to extend themselves to short trips or commuting.

References

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2. Donovan Research. *Qualitative research to guide the development of a bicycle promotion campaign*. Donovan Research Pty Ltd. Perth: Western Australia; 1999. Job No. 99017 (unpublished).

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