

Author reply

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Our finding that one in five respondents (22.6%) said they would cycle more if they didn't have to wear helmets¹ is significant, because if even half these people did cycle more, it could substantially increase the prevalence of cycling.

For Olivier et al.² to challenge that bicycle helmet legislation is a barrier to more people cycling is counter to all the available evidence. As stated in our article,¹ when legislation was introduced in Australia cycling levels fell by 30-40%, and the same phenomenon was observed in New Zealand in 1994. A recent national survey found one in six people reported helmets as a barrier to more cycling.³

The examination of the data by the other variables helps us to understand sub-groups and potential explanations of the main results, and there is some variation. However, some groups contributed less to cycling than others. Daily cyclists represent less than 2% of the population, and persons aged over 55 years had the lowest rates of cycling of any age group. None of the comments by Olivier et al. change the overall conclusion from the data that helmet legislation is a barrier to increasing levels of cycling in Australia.

Olivier et al. also question the well-documented 'safety in numbers' phenomenon. The observation that the more people cycle, the safer it is for all cyclists, also applies to pedestrians, and has also been observed in the growth of automobile use.^{4,5} Safer cycling conditions result from road users learning to accommodate the greater number of people cycling, as well as from more cycling facilities that result from the increased demand for such facilities created by more people cycling. Wegman et al. fail to realise that this is exactly how the process of 'safety in numbers' operates over time.⁶ In nature, the basic and immediate protection offered by groups, herds, flocks, or schools of animals provides a practical illustration of safety in numbers.

Olivier et al. are unashamedly pro-helmet advocates,^{7,8} apparently regardless of the collateral and overall net negative consequences from fewer people cycling.⁹ Mandatory helmet legislation has been highly contested since its implementation in Australia, and internationally there is no scientific consensus on the effectiveness of the legislation. If this legislation were attempted to be introduced today it would be unlikely to meet the criteria for evidence of cost-effectiveness.

The decision to maintain bicycle helmet legislation is not so much a scientific question but a political one. For 20 years the rest of the world has had access to the same data and evidence on helmet legislation as Australia, and yet few governments (apart from New Zealand and Brunei) have decided to follow our example, and some that did have repealed their legislation (for example, Israel and Mexico City).

References

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