

Research finds cycling on footpaths is dangerous... for cyclists

New research has found cyclists and pedestrians are at greater risk of injury with more footpath cycling.

Australia's largest walking organisation, the Council On The Ageing and Vision Australia are calling upon politicians to ignore cycling lobbyists' calls to allow teenagers and adults to ride on footpaths in Victoria.

Some cycling advocates have welcomed a recent decision in New South Wales to allow teenagers up to the age of 16 to ride on footpaths, but want to go further and allow all cyclists to ride on the footpath.

In response to calls for similar law changes in Victoria,¹ transport consultants MRCagney were commissioned by Victoria Walks to review the research on footpath cycling. The *Footpath Cycling Discussion Paper* found that cycling on footpaths introduces risks of cyclist-pedestrian collisions and:

- "Advocacy for footpath cycling appears to be based on the misconception that it is safer. Footpath cycling is accompanied by a distinct set of safety risks for cyclists, particularly associated with visibility between motor vehicles and cyclists at intersections and driveways."
- "There is no clear evidence that cycling on footpaths is safer than cycling on the street"
- "... crash risks for cyclists may be higher on the footpath than on the road."
- "...the presence of cyclists on footpaths is a real concern for people walking, particularly for elderly or other vulnerable users such as the vision impaired."

The MRCagney report describes a number of studies including NSW research that "estimated that the crash rate for cyclists on the footpath was 5.6 times that of cyclists on the road."

"The research review found that between 6 and 17 per cent of all cyclist crashes in Australia and New Zealand occurred on footpaths, even though footpath cycling was not allowed in most areas," said Ben Rossiter, Victoria Walks Executive Officer.

"Footpaths are not designed for cycling. Most are narrow, often in poor condition, with overhanging trees and high fences blocking views of vehicles coming out of driveways," said Dr Rossiter.

A separate study by the Amy Gillett Foundation found that "over half of the child bike rider crashes [between 2002 to 2012] ... involved being hit after emerging from a footpath or driveway².

"Bicycle Network don't even seem to claim that it would be a safe option for people to ride on the footpath, probably because they know that it wouldn't be," said Dr Rossiter. "Their argument is based on the suggestion people would feel safer. But it is dangerous to pretend footpaths are safe havens for cycling, particularly for teenage or novice riders."

¹ Currently in Victoria, only children under 12 years old and accompanying adults can ride on footpaths.

² <http://www.amygillett.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/Road-crashes-AGF-Report-FINAL-Sept-2015.pdf>

The research review also found that any move to legalise all-ages cycling could open local councils up to liability issues. “Suddenly the onus to make footpaths safe for cycling will fall to local councils,” Dr Rossiter said.

Mixing walking and cycling is also bad news for walkers, particularly older walkers or those with a disability, the discussion paper reported:

- A survey of 607 Victorians with vision impairment found that, as pedestrians, 8% had been involved in a collision and 20% in a near collision over the previous five years. A quarter of these collisions (or near collisions) were with bicycles.
- There is evidence that the presence and behaviour of cyclists is a key concern for older pedestrians. In one survey, approximately 40% of seniors identified cyclists on shared walking and cycling paths to be a factor which discouraged them from walking.
- In crashes between walkers and cyclists, the most serious injuries sustained by the pedestrian are usually because of secondary impacts to the pedestrian’s head after hitting the ground. The risk of a head injury to a pedestrian occurs at impacts with bikes travelling as slow as 10 km/h.
- A study from Sydney and Newcastle found the average speed of cyclists on footpaths was 21 km/h, the same speed as cyclists on roads.

“As people age, walking and accessing public transport becomes increasingly important and older walkers are particularly vulnerable sharing with cyclists”, said Ronda Held, COTA CEO. “Cycling safety is a concern for COTA, but solutions should not be at cost of safety for pedestrians”.

“While we understand the risks cyclists face on busy roads, making our footpaths less safe for everyone is hardly a solution,” said Dr Rossiter. He called for teenagers and novice riders to seek out alternative routes, in areas where safe cycling infrastructure does not yet exist.

“Keeping the pressure up on politicians to create safe, separated spaces for both cyclists and walkers is the best way to increase both cycling and walking participation,” said Dr Rossiter.

Vision Australia Manager of Government Relations Chris Edwards said, “People who are blind or have low vision rely heavily on walking and accessing public transport to travel independently but feel extremely nervous about doing so in environments that are commonly shared by cyclists.”

“Allowing more cyclists on footpaths will only increase the anxiety felt by people who are blind or have low vision and reduce their confidence in traveling independently.”

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More information, including the report and recommendations, is available at
www.victoriawalks.org.au/footpath-cycling