Safety in numbers: more walkers and bicyclists, safer walking and bicycling

P L Jacobsen

Objective: To examine the relationship between the numbers of people walking or bicycling and the frequency of collisions between motorists and walkers or bicyclists. The common wisdom holds that the number of collisions varies directly with the amount of walking and bicycling. However, three published analyses of collision rates at specific intersections found a non-linear relationship, such that collisions rates declined with increases in the numbers of people walking or bicycling.

Data: This paper uses five additional data sets (three population level and two time series) to compare the amount of walking or bicycling and the injuries incurred by people walking or bicycling.

Results: The likelihood that a given person walking or bicycling will be struck by a motorist varies inversely with the amount of walking or bicycling. This pattern is consistent across communities of varying size, from specific intersections to cities and countries, and across time periods.

Discussion: This result is unexpected. Since it is unlikely that the people walking and bicycling become more cautious if their numbers are larger, it indicates that the behavior of motorists controls the likelihood of collisions with people walking and bicycling. It appears that motorists adjust their behavior in the presence of people walking and bicycling. There is an urgent need for further exploration of the human factors controlling motorist behavior in the presence of people walking and bicycling.

Conclusion: A motorist is less likely to collide with a person walking and bicycling if more people walk or bicycle. Policies that increase the numbers of people walking and bicycling appear to be an effective route to improving the safety of people walking and bicycling.
motor vehicle use is measured, few jurisdictions collect similar data for the numbers of walkers and bicyclists. Most available estimates are obtained by surveys. Then again, since much walking and bicycling occurs in short trips that may not be recorded in surveys (for example, children crossing the street), survey data may be inaccurate as well.

Comparisons between jurisdictions are also complex. Laws governing motor vehicle operation, roadway design, techniques for collecting the number of injuries and numbers of people walking and bicycling, and other perhaps significant factors may vary. To minimize these complexities when comparing across jurisdictions, this analysis uses data sets collected by one entity.

This paper uses five data sets (three population level and two time series) to compare the amount of walking or bicycling and the injuries incurring in collisions with motor vehicles. For each data set, the measure of injuries to people walking or bicycling was compared to measure of walking and bicycling to determine the relationship. Parameters were calculated using least squares analysis for the function shown in equation (1):

\[ I = aE^b \]  

(1)

where \( I \) is the injury measure, \( E \) is the measure of walking or bicycling, and \( a \) and \( b \) are the parameters to be computed.

Exponent \( b \) indicates the change in the number of injuries in the population in response to changes in walking and bicycling. With \( b \) equal to 1, the growth in injuries with increasing exposure would be linear; \( b \) less than 1 indicates the growth in injuries would be less than linear; and \( b \) less than 0 indicates that increasing the number of walkers or bicyclists would decrease the total number of injuries to people walking and bicycling in a given population.

For an individual walking or bicycling, the relevant risk measure is for a unit of walking or bicycling. This risk can be estimated by dividing both sides of equation (1) by the measure of walking and bicycling, \( E \), resulting in equation (2):

\[ I/E = aE^{b-1} \]  

(2)

The graphs show this latter relationship, as it is easier to understand visually.

### DATA

In this analysis, three population data sets are employed to examine the relationship between numbers of walkers and bicyclists and the numbers of collisions with motorists across varying sizes of analysis areas, from cities to countries. In addition, two time series data sets are used to examine the effect of fluctuations in walking and bicycling on injuries.

### WALKING AND BICYCLING IN CALIFORNIA CITIES

Cities within one state in the United States allow a relatively consistent comparison. California has one law governing traffic and consistent traffic control devices. However, cities may choose their own roadway design features. In practice, roadway designs vary mostly by era of urbanization.

Injury data were obtained from police collision reports as summarized by the California Highway Patrol for year 2000. Injury incidence rates were calculated using the US census population estimates as adjusted by the State of California’s Department of Finance for year 2000. Of the 111 cities in California with a population over 60,000, the 68 cities with per capita injury rates to people walking and bicycling both greater than 30/100,000 were examined.

The US Census Bureau collects journey to work trip data for the year 2000. While such trips constitute only a fraction of all person trips, this analysis assumes that mode of journey to work is in proportion to mode for other person trips and uses it as a proxy for other person trips.

### WALKING, BICYCLING, AND MOVED RING IN 47 DANISH TOWNS

The Danish Bureau of Statistics collected travel behavior for 47 towns with populations greater than 10,000 for years 1993–96. (Søren U Jensen provided the travel and injury data for this analysis.)

### WALKING AND BICYCLING IN EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

European countries vary as to geography, roadway designs, traffic laws, and societal mores. A European Commission sponsored report compiled bicycling distances for 14 countries and person trips by foot and bicycle for eight countries for 1998. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development’s International Road Traffic and Accident Database reports traffic fatalities and population numbers for 1998.

### BICYCLING IN THE UNITED KINGDOM, 1950–99

The Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions in the United Kingdom measures the distance bicycled with annual surveys, and compiles fatality data, which combined allow a time series analysis.

### BICYCLING IN THE NETHERLANDS, 1980–98

The Netherlands Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek measures the distance bicycled with annual surveys and compiles fatality data.

### RESULTS

Table 1 shows the calculated results. Parameter \( b \) indicates the exponential change in the number of injuries in the population in response to changes in walking and bicycling.

---

**Table 1** Calculated results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Data</th>
<th>Injury measure</th>
<th>Exposure measure</th>
<th>Exponent for growth in injuries</th>
<th>95% Confidence interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Walking in 68 California cities</td>
<td>Injuries/capita</td>
<td>Portion journey to work trips on foot</td>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.27 to 0.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycling in 68 California cities</td>
<td>Injuries/capita</td>
<td>Portion journey to work trips on bicycle</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>0.22 to 0.41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking in 47 Danish towns</td>
<td>Injuries/capita</td>
<td>Kilometres walked/capita/day</td>
<td>0.36</td>
<td>-0.10 to 0.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycling in 47 Danish towns</td>
<td>Injuries/capita</td>
<td>Kilometres bicycled/capita/day</td>
<td>0.44</td>
<td>0.19 to 0.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycling in 14 European countries</td>
<td>Fatalities/capita</td>
<td>Kilometres bicycled/capita/day</td>
<td>0.58</td>
<td>0.38 to 0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walking in 8 European countries</td>
<td>Fatalities/capita</td>
<td>Trips on foot/capita/day</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>-0.71 to 0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycling in 8 European countries</td>
<td>Fatalities/capita</td>
<td>Trips on bicycle/capita/day</td>
<td>0.48</td>
<td>0.22 to 0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycling in the United Kingdom:</td>
<td>Fatalities</td>
<td>Billion kilometres ridden annually</td>
<td>-1.9</td>
<td>-2.7 to -1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.41</td>
<td>0.012</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>0.35 to 0.47</td>
<td>-0.25 to 0.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0.25 to 0.28</td>
<td>1.11 to 1.88</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

www.injuryprevention.com
Walking and bicycling in California cities

Per capita injury rates to pedestrians and bicyclists vary fourfold among the 68 cities, and the portion of journey to work trips made by foot and bicycle varies more than 15-fold and 20-fold (respectively). Dividing the per capita injury numbers by the fraction of work trips on foot or bicycle results in a fivefold and eightfold range of risk for a person walking or bicycling in the 68 cities. Figure 1 shows that the likelihood of an injury is not constant but decreases as walking or bicycling increases.

Walking and bicycle and moped riding in 47 Danish towns

Per capita injury rates to pedestrians and bicyclists varied twofold, and the number trips made by foot and bicycle varied more than fourfold and threefold (respectively). Dividing the per capita injury numbers by the aggregate distance walked or bicycled indicates a fivefold range of risk for a person walking or bicycling for the 47 towns. Figure 2 shows that despite considerable scatter in the results, pedestrians are safer in towns with greater walking and bicyclists are safer in towns with more bicycling.

Walking and bicycling in European countries

In the 14 countries with data, distance bicycled per capita varied 10-fold. Across them, the number of persons killed while bicycling varied fourfold. Dividing the number of bicyclist deaths per capita by the distance bicycled per capita indicates a nearly 20-fold range of risk for a person bicycling a given distance. Figure 3 shows that the number of bicyclist fatalities/distance bicycled decreases with increasing distance bicycled per capita.

In the eight countries with person trip data, the number of bicycle trips per capita varied by more than 10-fold and the number of trips on foot varied threefold. Dividing the per capita fatality rate by the daily foot and bicycle trips per capita data indicates a nearly fivefold range of risk of death for each trip. Figure 4 shows that the risk decreases with increasing trips on foot or on bicycle.

Bicycling in the United Kingdom, 1950–99

In the United Kingdom from 1950 to 1999, distance bicycled varied sixfold and bicyclist fatalities varied fivefold. Dividing the number of bicyclist deaths per capita by distance bicycled indicates a threefold range of risk for a given distance bicycled. Figure 5 shows the complex relationship between the number of bicyclist fatalities and the distance bicycled. Separating the data into three segments using the inflection points for distance ridden allows some understanding. Until 1973, as the United Kingdom motorized, the generally decreasing distance bicycled was accompanied by an increase in bicyclist fatalities/distance bicycled. From 1973 to 1983, the small increase in distance bicycled was accompanied by a large decrease in bicyclist fatalities/distance bicycled. This resurgence in bicycling may be related to the oil embargo and resulting increase in energy costs. In stark contrast, from 1984 to 1999, the decrease in distance bicycled was matched by a decrease in bicyclist fatalities/distance bicycled, indicating an increasing risk of a bicyclist fatality. This change may be related to the seatbelt law in 1983. One review suggested that the increase in seatbelt use transferred some risk to pedestrians and bicyclists as motorists felt safer and drove more aggressively and further. Average motorist speeds in built up areas in the United Kingdom increased from 45 km/h in 1981, before compulsory use of seatbelts, to 53 km/h in 1997. Less bicycling is a plausible response to more aggressive and faster motorists.

Bicycling in the Netherlands, 1980–98

In the Netherlands, bicycling distances increased generally from 1980 to 1998. Annual bicyclist fatalities in the same time
period decreased from 426 to 194. Dividing the number of bicyclist deaths per capita by distance bicycled indicates a nearly threefold range in risk for a given distance bicycled. Figure 6 shows that the number of bicyclist fatalities-distance traveled decreased rapidly with increasing distance bicycled.

**DISCUSSION**

Multiple independent data sets show that the total number of pedestrians or bicyclists struck by motorists varies with the 0.4 power of the amount of walking or bicycling (respectively). This relationship is consistent across geographic areas from specific intersections to cities and countries. Furthermore, Leden found the same relationship in a before and after study of 45 bicycle path intersections with roadways. In the industrialized countries examined, this relationship holds across a wide range of walking and bicycling.

Interpreting the time series data is complicated as some changes could result from forces not measured. Improvements in post-trauma medical care complicate comparing years—indeed for the period 1989 to 1995 Roberts et al found a 16%/year reduction in fatalities for severely injured children in the United Kingdom. Changes in the distribution of age in the population could also complicate comparisons. Furthermore, while the number of fatalities are likely accurately reported, record keeping for the distance bicycled may have changed. Also, the risk of some bicycle fatalities may be unrelated to distance traveled (for example, fewer children playing in residential areas might change the fatality numbers but not distance traveled).

Nonetheless, the British time series data indicate that decreasing bicycle riding leads to increased risk, and increasing risk leads to decreasing bicycle use. In contrast, over the last two decades, the Netherlands has implemented a range of policies to encourage people to walk and bicycle and make them safer. These efforts have succeeded in increasing bicycle use and decreasing risk.

The time series data also provide an understanding of cause. The possible explanations are changes in human behavior, roadway design, laws, and social mores. However, insofar as the changes seen in the time series data occurred rapidly and with both increasing and decreasing amounts of bicycling, it is improbable that the roadway design, traffic laws, or social mores, all of which change relatively slowly, could explain the relationship between exposure and injury rates. The more plausible explanation involves changes in behavior associated with changes in the amount of walking and bicycling.

Whose behavior changes, the motorist’s or that of the people walking and bicycling? It seems unlikely that people walking or bicycling obey traffic laws more or defer to motorists more in societies or time periods with greater walking and bicycling. Indeed it seems less likely, and hence unable to explain the observed results. Adaptation in motorist behavior seems more plausible and other discussions support that view. Tidd reported three studies showing “motorists in the United States and abroad drive more slowly when they see many pedestrians in the street and faster when they see few.” In addition, motorists in communities or time periods with greater walking and bicycling are themselves more likely to occasionally walk or bicycle and hence may give greater consideration to people walking and bicycling. Accordingly, the most plausible explanation for the improving safety of people walking and bicycling would provide benefits beyond just the immediate area. Such awareness techniques should be investigated for community wide health benefits.

Another question arises about laws governing the interaction between motorists and vulnerable road users. For example, in the United States, if a motorist strikes a person walking between intersections, the motorist is unlikely to face criminal charges. Yet if motorist behavior largely controls the number of collisions, laws should be revised to reflect this finding.

**CONCLUSIONS**

A motorist is less likely to collide with a person walking and bicycling when there are more people walking or bicycling. Modeling this relationship as a power curve yields the result that at the population level, the number of motorists colliding with people walking or bicycling will increase at roughly 0.4 power of the number of people walking or bicycling. For example, a community doubling its walking can expect a 32% increase in injuries ($2^{0.4} = 1.32$). Taking into account the amount of walking and bicycling, the probability that a motorist will strike an individual person walking or bicycling declines with the roughly –0.6 power of the number of persons walking or bicycling. An individual’s risk while walking in a community with twice as much walking will reduce to 66% ($2^{0.6} = 0.66$). Accordingly, policies that increase the numbers of people walking and bicycling appear to be an effective route to improving the safety of people walking and bicycling.
valuable editorial advice. Virginia Gangsei helped clarify the
Komanoff, Marie Birnbaum, and three anonymous reviewers provided
and Petra Staats provided data to help answer these questions. Charles
Ronkin, Rick Warring, Malcolm Wardlaw, John Pucher, Lewis Dijkstra,
the role of safety in numbers. Chris Morfas, Søren Jensen, Michael
asked if the public health goal of more walking and bicycling
into the importance of accounting for the amount of walking and
city was a dangerous place to bicycle, prompting this investigation

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 1998, the Pasadena, California, City Council asked whether their
city was a dangerous place to bicycle, prompting this investigation
into the importance of accounting for the amount of walking and
bicycling. Anne Seeley of California Department of Health Services
asked if the public health goal of more walking and bicycling
conflicted with reducing injuries, adding impetus to understanding
the role of safety in numbers. Chris Morfas, Søren Jensen, Michael
Ronkin, Rick Warring, Malcolm Wardlaw, John Pucher, Lewis Dijkstra,
and Petra Staats provided data to help answer these questions. Charles
Komanoff, Martin Birnbaum, and three anonymous reviewers provided
valuable editorial advice. Virginia Gangsei helped clarify the
presentation.

REFERENCES

1 Murray CJL, Lopez AD. Mortality by cause for eight regions of the
2 Murray CJL, Lopez AD. Global mortality, disability, and the contribution
3 Nantulya VM, Reich MR. The neglected epidemic: road traffic injuries
4 Runge JW, Cole TB. Crosswalk markings and motor vehicle collisions
5 Mohan D. Road safety in less-motorized environments: future concerns.
6 Pucher J, Dijkstra L. Making walking and cycling safe: lessons from
7 Bundesanstalt für Straßenwesen. International road traffic and
accident database (RTAD). Available at: http://www.bast.de/html/
8 Ekmann L. On the treatment of flow in traffic safety analysis—a
Lund, Sweden: Institutionen för Trafikteknik, Lunds Tekniska Högskola,
1996.
9 Leden L, Gårdner P, Pulkkinen U. An expert judgment mode applied to
estimating the safety effect of a bicycle facility. Accid Anal Prev
10 Leden L. Pedestrian risk decrease with pedestrian flow. A case study
based on data from signalised intersections in Hamilton, Ontario. Accid
11 Susser M. Glossary: causality in public health science. J Epidemiol
and police ascertainment of automobile versus childhood pedestrian and
13 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Safety
of vulnerable road users. DSTI/DO1/RTF/K57(98)/Final. Paris: OECD,
1998.
14 Business, Transportation and Housing Agency (California). Annual
report of fatal and injury motor vehicle traffic collisions. Sacramento:
15 Department of Finance (California). Historical adjusted city, county
and state population estimates, 1991–2000, with adjusted 1990 census
16 Bureau of the Census. Census of population and housing, 2000:
summary tape file 3. (Machine-readable data files.) Washington, DC:
17 Jensen SU. DUMAS—safety of pedestrians and two-wheelers.
Copenhagen: Danish Road Directorate, 1998.
18 Hydén C, Nilsson A, Risser R. WALKYNG—how to enhance walking
and cycling instead of shorter car trips and to make those modes safer.
Bulletin 165. Lund, Sweden: Institutionen för Trafikteknik, Lunds Tekniska
19 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
International road traffic and accident database, fatalities by traffic
htdocs/fachthemen/irtad/english/we33.html (accessed 20 October
2001).
20 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.
International road traffic and accident database, selected reference
values for year 2000. Issued: April 2002. Available at:
http://www.bast.de/htdocs/fachthemen/irtad/english/weng1.html
(accessed 11 July 2002).
21 UK Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions.
Available at: http://www.transtat.dtlr.gov.uk/tables/2000/tt/s1tables/
tt_1-01.htm and http://www.transtat.dtlr.gov.uk/tables/2000/tt/
s3tables/tt3-06.htm (accessed 17 August 2002).
22 Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek. Voorburg/Heerlen, the
Netherlands, 2002.
23 McCarthy M. The benefits of seat belt legislation in the United Kingdom.
24 Reinhardt Rüttland AH. Seat-belts and behavioural adaptation: the loss
25 Roberts I, Campbell F, Hollis S, et al. Reducing accident death rates in
children and young adults: the contribution of hospital care. BMJ
26 Li G, Shattah C, Grabowski JG, et al. Secular trends of motor vehicle
2001;33:423–32.