

Why Don't Women Cycle?

A Case Study of Women's Perceptions of Cycling in San Francisco

Dorry Funaki
August, 2019

Safety and women's perceptions of safety is a prevalent factor affecting the gender gap of cycling within the US. In this study, the use of bike lanes in the South of Market Area of San Francisco found that only 29% of the cyclists were female despite accounting for 50% of the population in the area. This research brief summarizes key issues found in this study of women's perceptions of safety when cycling.

Overview of the Issue

Safety and women's perceptions of safety play a significant role in whether or not they choose to cycle, to the point that when women travel, they tend to "make a number of activity and travel choices based on their perceptions of their safety,"¹ even to the point of turning down employment opportunities if they perceive unsafe travel options.

In the US, a study found "two to three times higher risk of fatality among US cyclists as compared to places like Holland or Germany, places that boast substantially higher rates of bicycling"². Years of investment in autocentric mobility have made safety a serious problem for those choosing to cycle, creating an issue for all cyclists, primarily women. In the US, "we no longer prevent women from bicycling by rule or custom, but by public policies and infrastructure"³.

In addition to safety, family structures and responsibilities heavily impact women's ability to cycle. These responsibilities affect the types of trips they make throughout the day, which might not be conducive to cycling. Other findings show that all women and especially women of color are more likely to cycle if there are cycling communities in place that represent them. One study found that "38% of African Americans agreed that their perception of bicyclists would improve with a broader representation of bicyclists that included women and people of color"⁴. Another study found that "social structures have a large effect on bicycling choice and that changes must be made to encourage "anyone" to bicycle rather than just those who identify as bicyclists"⁵.

The Study

Why Don't Women Cycle is created from a study⁶ funded by C40 Cities through a grant to the San Francisco Department of the Environment. During the summer of 2018, a group of UC Berkeley researchers and volunteers from San Francisco Department of the Environment conducted observations, intercept surveys, and focus groups in order to study women and their use of bike lanes in the South of Market Area of San Francisco. Additional data analysis from the US Census and the

1. Rosenbloom, Sandra, United States, Department of Transportation, Research and Special Programs Administration, and Conference on Women's Travel Issues, eds. *Women's Travel Issues: Research Needs and Priorities: Conference Proceedings and Papers*. Washington, D.C.: The Administration: For sale by the Supt. of Docs., U.S. G.P.O., 1980.

2. Bahr, Emilie. *Urban Revolutions: A Woman's Guide to Two-Wheeled Transportation*. Portland, Oregon: Microcosm Publishing, 2016.

3. Bahr pg. 23

4. Princeton Survey Research Associates, 2012; The League of American Bicyclists et al., 2013

5. Steinbach, Rebecca, Judith Green, Jessica Datta, and Phil Edwards. "Cycling and the City: A Case Study of How Gendered, Ethnic and Class Identities Can Shape Healthy Transport Choices." *Social Science & Medicine* (1982) 72 (February 1, 2011): 1123-30. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2011.01.033>.

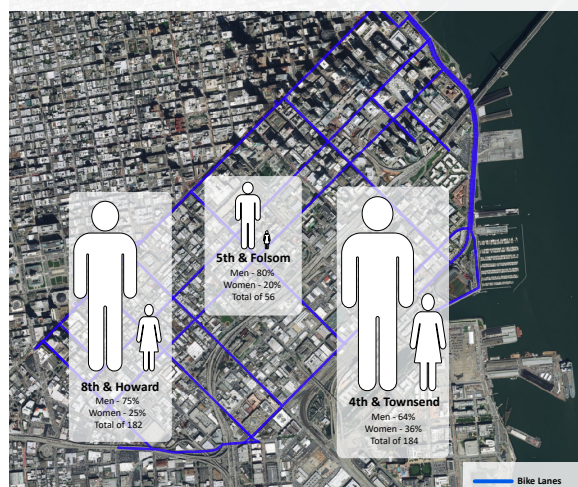
6. Deakin, Elizabeth, Vidya Bhamidi, Dorry Funaki, Tasha Golani, and Margaret McCarthy. "Women and Cycling: A Case Study of the Use of San Francisco Bike Lanes, Paper Prepared for the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group." Research Report prepared for the Dept. of Environment, City of San Francisco, and C40 Cities. Summer 2018.

San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency as well as graphic summaries were developed in 2019 with funding from SafeTrec and the California Office of Traffic Safety to inform the recommendations of gender-equitable bike lanes.

Findings

- Out of the 433 usable surveys, 69% of respondents identified as male, 29% identified as female, and 2% identified as Transgender/Other/Non-Conforming. A statistical regression of the survey found that **women are less likely to cycle daily than men are.**
- Safety is much more likely to affect women's travel decisions than men's. **Women of color are more likely to take safety into account when making travel decisions than White Non-Hispanic women.**
- With regard to the relationship of gender and race to cycling in the Bay Area: (1) **being female does have a negative relationship with cycling,** (2) there is a positive relationship between men and women who identify as Non-Hispanic White to cycling, meaning those who identify as Non-Hispanic White were found to cycle more than other ethnicities.

Gender Split for Cyclists in the Study Area



Key Issues Affecting Women Cyclists

Poor Road Conditions



Potholes and poor upkeep of roads are a deterrent to female cyclists.

Shared Drop Off



Shared drop off lanes causes tensions between buses, taxis, and cyclists.

Shared Bike Lane



Bike lanes shared with transit and other vehicles offer no protection for cyclists having to move through those areas.

Safety is the number one reason women don't bike, they're afraid of cars.



There's a lot of scary potholes. If you're biking on Folsom, there are so many cracks, at the same time you need to go pretty fast if you want to make the lights.



Shared Bus Stop



Bus drop offs cause pinch points for cyclists moving through the area.

Construction



Construction poses another hazard for cyclists moving through the area.

Right Turn Pinchpoint



Lack of bicycle infrastructure to support cyclists making right turns onto Howard. Causes cyclists to use pedestrian crosswalk instead of staying in the bike lane.

I want to bike more, even though I get concerned about the traffic. The traffic is crazy here in the city...right now I BART and walk, and I'd like to BART and cycle, so I can get that exercise.



The construction, that's why I'm not biking anymore regularly... the whole area is dominated by construction, and I don't feel safe getting a flat tire.



Conclusions

A little less than 30% of cyclists in the South of Market neighborhood identify as women, and this proportion of female cyclists is reflective of cyclists in the US. Issues like safety, family obligations, and lack of women cycling, especially women of color cyclists who are visible in the cycling community, have proven to be deterrents for female cyclists.

Observations and surveys for this study were collected during weekday commute and midday hours, but future studies should also collect surveys and conduct observations during the weekend to sample a greater number of women.

In order to help ease the gender disparity in cycling, this research brief recommends greater investment be placed on protected bike lanes with complete connections to help ease perceptions of safety.

More studies like this are important to ensure gender-equitable cities. Sensitivity towards women, and those women who identify as women of color when planning and designing accessible and safe bicycle lanes benefits communities as they promote climate mitigation efforts of lowering vehicle congestion and provide more travel options for women.