

Biking Advocacy in U.S. Cities

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On my honor as a University student, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid on this assignment as defined by the Honor Guidelines for Thesis-Related Assignments.

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In the twentieth century, the perception of streets as a medium primarily for motor vehicles displaced older, more inclusive perceptions. In the 1880s and 1890s, American bicyclists led the Good Roads Movement, which called for better paved roads for cycling (Kelly, 2017). In the 1920s, automotive interest groups collaborated to redefine streets so as to prioritize motor vehicles (Kelly, 2017). Yet demand for more inclusive streets persisted. Many proponents of more affordable, healthful, inclusive, and sustainable modes of mobility, including cycling, questioned the prioritization of motor vehicles. Most recently, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a large boom in bicycle usage and sales (Dowell et al., 2021). In the U.S., most cycling advocacy is local and urban. Advocates demand safer and more accessible cycling accommodations to make bicycling a more practical mode of transport for more people. To pursue policy change and cycling infrastructure, advocacies in U.S. cities such as Chicago, New York, and Portland petition local governments, educate the public, and engage in grassroots organizing. In so doing, they invoke values such as sustainability, equity, and health.

Review of Research

According to Ritchie (2020), a person who foregoes driving to ride a bicycle can reduce personal travel emissions by 75 percent. On U.S. roads and streets, however, cycling can be stressful and dangerous. Accommodations such as “on-street painted bicycle lanes, off-street trails, separated bicycle paths, and neighbourhood bikeways” (Branion-Calles et al., 2019) can protect cyclists and thereby promote cycling. Wherever motor vehicle traffic predominates, cycling accommodations that separate cyclists from larger motor vehicles (those with four or

more wheels) protect cyclists best (Branion-Calles et al., 2019). In U.S. cities, such accommodations are rare. Often state officials introduce accommodations only in response to so-called “demonstrated demand” (one or more traffic deaths), or to continuous pressure (Levin, 2020). Winters et al. (2012) explain that perceptions of biking desirability generally correlate with safety conditions. Even where potential cycling demand is high, hazardous conditions can suppress actual demand, which may then be misinterpreted as low potential demand.

Park and Akar (2019) concluded that bicyclists will move to areas with good bicycle facilities and prefer high-density neighborhoods over suburban areas. According to the Pew Research Center, working-age adults (ages 25 to 44) are increasingly moving to urban areas over suburban in the U.S, citing the labor market, income, housing, and education as the major factors (Fry, 2020). This influx of people could increase demand for bikes; the question remains how advocates of biking will utilize a greater population size to their advantage.

Gössling et al. (2022) concluded that owning a car is an expensive consumer good by reviewing its initial costs and cost per kilometer. According to Brown et al. (2009), since the mid twentieth century, state highway engineers have prioritized motorists, striving for maximum motor vehicle throughput and thereby contributing to the car domination that became typical of U.S. cities. Biking advocates therefore face a status quo that is antagonistic to cycling.

Petitioning Local Governments

Advocacies demand state and local policy change to make cycling safer and more convenient. Better Streets Chicago (BSC) is an advocacy in Chicago that calls for better bike infrastructure and open streets. To pressure policy change from the Chicago Department of

Transportation (CDOT), BSC organized an email campaign that “resulted in more than 200 letters being sent to CDOT” and to local aldermen, demanding that they “fix the lanes” (Cobbs, 2021). In response, Alderman Andre Vazquez persuaded CDOT to agree to install concrete curbs next to the bike lanes to keep them free of illegally parked cars and to safely separate cars and bicyclists (Vasquez, 2021). In a statement, Vasquez (2021) said, “I am grateful for the partnership of ... neighbors and bike advocates ... who were vocal and organized in joining us to make this a priority.” The public must fight against irregularities to result pressure on local leaders.

In Portland, Oregon, The Street Trust advocacy wants a greater share of state transportation funds to support cycling. In 2021, it organized a coalition called Safe Routes for All, which called for “increasing the share of state highway funds invested in walking and biking from 1% to 5%” (Street Trust, n.d.-a). However, the bill failed in committee, as it lacked funding (Maus, 2021). The Street Trust, however, cited that elected officials testified in hearings, individuals submitted testimonials, and the campaign got media coverage (Street Trust, n.d.-b). The Street Trust has also organized a campaign for the expenditure of federal funding from The Oregon Department of Transportation (ODOT) (Miller, 2022). The advocacy has listed three ways in which people can help: filling out an ODOT survey, submitting a comment, and providing oral remarks (Miller, 2022). They help craft a testimony, making clear to “invest in programs with better safety, climate, and equity impacts” (Miller, 2022).

In 2022, BikeLoud PDX, a biking advocacy in Portland, filed a lawsuit against the City of Portland for not appropriating funds towards bicycle infrastructure, which was mandated in a previous state statute (BikeLoud PDX, n.d.). BikeLoud PDX indicates that “every life has value,” in the context of “129 people [who] have died on Portland streets” (BikeLoud PDX,

n.d.). The advocacy invokes a rhetoric of social equity in its bid to challenge a car-first status quo: “Safer infrastructure helps children and their families to get to school . . . helps people who cannot afford cars to travel for everyday errands . . . and help old people to travel with dignity” (BikeLoud PDX, n.d.).

In New York, Transportation Alternatives (TA) organizes campaigns for policy change to get better cycling infrastructure for the city. The Open Streets Program in New York City closes streets to vehicle traffic that creates space for bicyclists and pedestrians (City of New York, n.d.). In a 2022 campaign for “24/7 Open Streets,” TA distributed a digital form letter for cycling advocates to write to Mayor Eric Adams and pressure him to convert car space into Open Streets. According to the letter: “Open Streets have given us safe space to be outside” (TA, 2022-a). The letter symbolizes the city’s “recovery” with a healthier future (TA, 2022-a). In response, Mayor Adams unveiled 11 city blocks as open streets during the 2022 holiday season, quoting the “city’s comeback is strong, equitable, and inclusive” (Office of the Mayor, 2022).

Educating the public

How to ride a bicycle

Proponents of cycling present it as enjoyable. Volunteers offer to introduce cycling to people who’ve never ridden a bike. In Portland, the Community Cycling Center (CCC) teaches children how to ride. The CCC described their holiday bike drive event where “the kids rode a fun course and [got] acquainted with their new two-wheeled friends . . . children even learn how to ride for the first time!” (Morris, 2021). An event volunteer added: “There’s something really

special about watching kids riding a bike for the first time knowing that it’s just the beginning of longer journeys,” expressing her enthusiasm to see kids enjoy a healthy hobby (Morris, 2021). An advocacy called Bike New York hosts a similar program in K-12 schools to teach children how to ride. One student said that the program “encourages people who haven’t had the opportunity to ride if they do not have a bike” (Aracil, 2022). The Street Trust partnered with Andando en Bicicletas y Caminando, a Portland-based biking advocacy, to promote e-bikes around the city: “last weekend’s workshop was an e-bike clinic that went beyond the typical safety skills . . . [allowing] participants to assist others interested in trying out Portland’s bike-share” (Carlson, 2022). This workshop targets the need for more secure bike parking in the city, as more people utilize rideshare systems for faster, sustainable travel over motor vehicles (Carlson, 2022).

In 2022, CDOT expanded their “Learn To Ride” program and now offers classes for all skill levels (City of Chicago, 2022). Notably, they offered classes in both English and Spanish (City of Chicago, 2022). The program’s advanced course includes topics like “[planning] routes to your destination, the different types of bike lanes, and how to position yourself on the street” (City of Chicago, 2022). CDOT facilitated more users into the program by offering free bicycles to eligible participants (FOX 32 Chicago, 2022). Since the cost of owning a car is very expensive, CDOT increased the mobility of low-income residents.

Environmental benefits of biking

Advocates present its environmental benefits and the consequences of other modes of transportation. NYC 25x25, a coalition spearheaded by TA, explained that closing Park Avenue in New York City to motor vehicles resulted in a 58 percent drop in ultrafine particulate matter

(NYC 25x25, n.d.). According to the New York City Department of Health, air pollution amounts to 6% of deaths annually to New Yorkers, as presented in a colorful image on their website (NYC DOHMH, n.d.). TA also relates the benefits of increased space for pedestrians and bicyclists to mortality rates in the COVID-19 pandemic, as air pollution exacerbates death rates of airborne diseases (HSPH, 2020).

TA releases information on the health and environmental benefits of bicycle infrastructure, stating that “in New York State, health, environmental resilience, and mobility are directly tied to race, economic class, and how streets are designed and used” (TA, 2023). TA publicizes the inequity of streets in New York City, as “neighborhoods with the largest populations of people of color have dramatically higher asthma rates, fewer streets with protected bike lanes and bus lanes, and higher traffic injury rates” (TA, 2023). In 2022, TA published their spatial equity report, citing that “in the 10 City Council districts with the highest particulate matter air pollution levels, traffic volumes are 50 percent higher and buses are 16 percent slower” (TA, 2022-b). TA highlights areas where high car pollution disproportionately affects those who use public transport.

In Chicago, the Active Transportation Alliance (ATA) advocacy is one of many organizations that is pushing for dedicated trails along the Chicago River for walking and biking. The advocacy cites that this trail will result in the “promotion of active transportation, like biking and walking, [supporting] healthy communities, cleaner environments, and a vibrant local economy” (ATA, n.d.). Carol Maher, an ATA ambassador who spreads information on biking said, “[biking] lets me be a better steward of the planet by not driving a car and riding a bike everywhere and being more responsible as a human on this Earth.” (Norris, 2019). In reference to the completion of the Manor Neighborhood Greenway in Chicago, which connects with the

Chicago River Trail, Maher adds: “People are afraid of change, and then when it happens, it’s like, oh wow, that really wasn’t as horrible as I thought” (Norris, 2019).

The Street Trust created the “OurStreets” initiative, stating that green investments will “improve the air we breathe, keep families safer, support outdoor activity, reduce carbon emissions” (The Street Trust, n.d.-c). The advocacy created an interactive map in which people can mark unsafe streets, including environmental hazards, thus putting the power in the people to educate others (The Street Trust, n.d.-c). Moreover, The Street Trust questioned ODOT’s uses of federal funding, as their spending patterns result in “areas that have been profoundly underinvested with enormous negative climate and equity outcomes” (Miller, 2022). These funds are appropriated towards the expansion of highways over bicycling infrastructure, which increase miles driven and greenhouse gas emissions (Miller, 2022).

Grassroots Organizing

Group Rides

Advocacies host group rides to promote biking and build community. Bike New York hosts a bike ride for any skill level through all five boroughs of New York City: “For one day, the roads are yours, the bridges are yours, the City is yours—there's no better way to experience NYC” (Bike New York, n.d.-a). Moreover, this advocacy also hosts virtual bike rides where participants can utilize a realistic software interface with their own bicycle at home, as they explain, “bike through New York City car-free, and enjoy the landscapes of the Hudson Valley and rural and coastal New Jersey, all from home this winter” (Bike New York, n.d.-b). This

virtual aspect builds community with riders who feel uncomfortable riding outdoors and maintains the health of those who stay indoors.

Angela Azzolino, a member of Get Women Cycling, an advocacy focused on female cyclists, describes the dangers women have cycling alone: “It’s very intimidating alone — bike commuting is still 70, 75 percent male . . . a lot of times you still get heckled” (Ramsay, 2019). However, Azzolino encourages her group rides, as she says, “when you’re in a group environment, it’s very different” (Ramsay, 2019). TA hosts bike rides for women, as they seek to “address the dramatic gender disparities in cycling in New York City” (TA, n.d.). NightCAP Brooklyn, a social club that “holds regular rides intended for women, trans, non-binary, and queer riders,” aims to be inclusive and ease the intimidation of biking (Ramsay, 2019). Sam Way, a participant in NightCAP Brooklyn, described their experience: “It was still great to feel like part of a group and to be able to ride around at night without too many concerns” (Way, n.d.).

Achillies International, a global organization that empowers people with disabilities, hosts biking events for those who cannot ride regular bikes (Ramsay, 2019). Instead, they host handcycling (cycling with your hands) or adaptive cycling (manufactured bikes with more stability). Nancy Briggs, a member, explained her experience: “It’s very uplifting because everyone is so positive and it has just opened up a whole new world for me” (Schneider, 2022). She adds: “There are people who have one leg, two legs, a prosthetic, don’t have a prosthetic, just all different kinds of people” (Schneider, 2022).

Umbrella PDX, a biking advocacy in Portland, hosts an annual festival during the summer called Pedalpalooza, where daily bike rides are hosted by “community members who volunteer their time to dream up a ride, plan it, and make magic happen for all of us to enjoy”

(Umbrella PDX, n.d.). Alongside “flagship rides” which house more than 1000 riders, new rides are created every year with as little as 1 or 2 riders (Shift, n.d.). The Street Trust hosts an annual New Year’s Day Ride when “streets are quiet” and thus “allows . . . routes that might be unpleasant on any other day” (The Street Trust, n.d.-d). The organizers of this ride highlighted the “upcoming changes happening for people biking and walking” around Portland and the areas still need of improvement (The Street Trust, n.d.-d).

Protests and Rallies

Advocacies host demonstrations and demand safer cycling infrastructure. In 2019, three cyclists were killed in a one-week span in New York: a bike messenger was hit by a truck, a cyclist was struck by a car, and a cyclist was struck by a cement truck (Hu & Surico, 2019). In response to the three deaths which totaled to 15 in 2019, cyclists in New York staged a “die-in” with their bikes, a protest where a group of people lie down in a place as if were dead (Aratani, 2019; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.). Joseph Cutrufo, communications director for TA said, “people are literally dying on the streets because they’re not being adequately protected” (Aratani, 2019). Former Mayor Bill de Blasio said that the city was facing an “emergency” (Hu & Surico, 2019). Jamie Taylor, a cyclist from Brooklyn, called his experience biking in New York as “horrifying,” and that “this is a dense urban center, and there are hundreds of thousands of cars in it. That’s inappropriate” (Aratani, 2019). Nkani Owate, a cyclist for an app-based food delivery service stated that “the enforcement is only on the bicycles,” as many people at the protest were disgusted towards the police’s actions (Quigley, 2019).

In 2018, Madison Lyden died in New York, as she got run over in traffic (Kuntzman & Meyer, 2018). In response, advocates placed a “ghost bike” at the street of the incident—a white

bike with pictures of Lyden and pink ribbons (Kuntzman & Meyer, 2018). Upon the unveiling of the bike, Lyden's friend Carolyn Bischof notes, "this gives me hope that we'll get change" (Kuntzman & Meyer, 2018). A memorial was held by advocacy groups like TA and Families for Safe Streets, who have called for a protected bike lane in the area (Krisel, 2018).

In 2022, The Street Trust, Bike Loud PDX, and Oregon Walks organized a vigil and demonstration for Sarah Pliner, a cyclist who was killed by a truck (Maus, 2022). Participants wore green vests and created a human protected bike lane, in which they stood arm-in-arm with their bikes alongside the street in complete silence. Once the signal turned red, Ashton Simpson, a Metro Councilor, stood in front of the cars holding a sign that read "Human Bike Box" (Maus, 2022). Estelle Morley, a cyclist who has been hit by a car, stated that "there's not enough urgency" (Maus, 2022). Another participant, Dave Gray, thinks "road rage has become a lot worse during the pandemic" (Maus, 2022).

Every year, as part of Pedalpalooza, Portland hosts the World Naked Bike Ride (WNBR), in which thousands of people ride their bikes on the streets naked (PDXWNBR, n.d.). Historically, this ride poised as a protest against the dependence on oil and the negative health impacts (PDXWNBR, n.d.). Today, this ride challenges a car-first status quo, as the WNBR's website describes: "By cycling naked we declare our confidence in the beauty and individuality of our bodies and the bicycles's place as a catalyst for change" (PDXWNBR, n.d.). Their website offers a bicycle's place in modern transport, as "you don't need a wheelbarrow to carry a pea" (PDXWNBR, n.d.). Megan Sinnott, an organizer for WNBR, states, "we're getting people who are buying bikes or borrowing bikes or dusting off bikes and getting out there and thinking, 'This is fun; I can do this'" (Cooke, 2013).

Bike Grid Now, a biking advocacy in Chicago, organized a protest named Jamapalooza, where hundreds of people biked around Chicago and congregated at an intersection for a “die-in” demonstration (Greenfield, 2022-b). A video of the demonstration shows cyclists flooding the intersection and setting down their bikes, while cars honk noisily (Greenfield, 2022-a). Carl Beien, a participant with a megaphone, announces: “. . . it is far too dangerous on these roads . . . We need freedom from car culture. This is our city” (Greenfield, 2022-a).

Conclusion

Biking advocacies in these three U.S. cities employ various techniques to promote biking and focus on its equity, sustainability, and health. Advocacies provide the tools to the public to make their voice heard. Alongside encouraging new riders, better cycling infrastructure is a priority for advocacies so that biking is practical. Researchers should look towards the connections between how biking is viewed and how it is encouraged in other U.S. cities, including those that have a smaller biking culture, to better understand the effective ways organizations achieve their agendas.

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