

Personal Submission to Vulnerable Road Users Enquiry

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Lecturer



I make this personal submission to the Enquiry on the basis of over ten years of experience as a cyclist in Canberra. I ride daily, both as a road cyclist or “roadie”, and as an off-road commuter, most often towing a child trailer.

My observations and recommendations here relate principally to my experiences as a roadie.

Observations

- Roadies tend to train in the early mornings, from around 6-7.30am, in bunches. This behaviour brings us into conflict with a subset of other road users, most especially builders and tradespeople on their way to work. We are frequently the target of verbal abuse as well as aggressive and threatening driving, and I have seen and heard of those I ride with being deliberately knocked from their bikes by utes and cars on morning training rides.
- Abuse, aggression, dangerous driving around cyclists and so on happen very frequently on morning rides. When one has done such riding for over ten years almost daily, one realises that these are not isolated incidents, but rather constitute a pattern of behaviour.
- As an anthropologist I see this as reflecting an “anti-cyclist culture” among certain groups of drivers, particularly builders and tradespeople. From conversations with such folks, I gather that the prevailing opinion is that cyclists are not legitimate road users and cycle on the road at their own risk. Some drivers take it upon themselves to “teach” cyclists that their place is not on the road, and I believe this is something we can identify as a form of anti-cyclist vigilantism.
- Anecdotally, I'd conclude that few drivers among this group or at large seem to even know that cyclists have the same rights on the road as motorised vehicles, and some special rights, such as the right to ride two abreast. If they are aware of these rights, they tend to view them as illegitimate, and do not see themselves as being bound to respect them.
- I believe that the existing road infrastructure in Canberra serves roadies very well. The problems we have are not fundamentally a result of a cramped or over-stressed road system, but rather are ones that are produced by negligent and aggressive driving. Infrastructural improvements can always be made, but I'd argue that our emphasis should be on teaching people how to use our already ample road resources in such a way as not to endanger, threaten or deter vulnerable road users.

Recommendations

- Further legal protections for cyclists (such as a 1.5m or 2m passing rule) are an important initiative. However, I'd argue that our immediate problem is to create awareness of and respect for the already significant legal rights and protections cyclists enjoy. I would argue there is a “cultural solution” to the problem of dangerous or aggressive driving that is even

more important than any proposed legal solution. If I was the one in charge of a limited budget to improve the safety of cyclists and walkers, I would be spending it ALL on advertising, education and community engagement, since this is by far the area in which the biggest bang for buck in terms of improving safety can be achieved.

- Thus in tandem with any physical or legal approach to improving the safety of vulnerable road users, we need a significant program of awareness-raising and education. Most obviously this involves advertising on television and in other digital and print media. Messages stressing the legal status of cyclists on the road, as well as their legitimacy as road users, would be important here.
- Having compulsory questions highlighting the road rules pertaining to cyclists and walkers in the Learner driver test is also an excellent approach, as is incorporating education and testing on driving around vulnerable road users into Provisional license training. All too often I am passed dangerously on narrow streets by people driving on L plates with “professional” instructors sitting next to them!
- Advertising and community engagement programs targeted specifically at those likely to drive in such a way as to endanger vulnerable road users, and most especially those who engage in anti-cyclist vigilantism, would also be an important strategy. In subcultures where negative attitudes towards cyclists function as a mark of pride and belonging there seems to be a strong need for intervention through direct engagement education programs (e.g. in schools or in the workplace).
- Sad to say but the anti-cyclist culture also extends to policing in the ACT. I'd argue for a program of culture-change within the police force itself. Where there has been a clear violation of the road rules and a vulnerable road user has been injured, the police need to apply the law 100% of the time. Officers should also be trained about how to deal with the victims of negligent or aggressive driving in a sensitive and respectful way. (To cite my own experience, when I was hit by a driver who failed to give way and was driving without her license in the car, the police suggested to me while I was lying in bed in Emergency that the driver had made an “honest mistake” and that they didn't plan to take any action. My refusal to be satisfied with this led to a loud argument in emergency, and I had to call on the officers' supervisor to ask that the law be applied in this case. I'm told this is not at all an atypical experience).
- While frustrated drivers often claim that cyclists slow or delay them, it is hard to believe that an average car commute in Canberra could be significantly slowed by the presence of cyclists, even riding in large bunches. Compared to other factors, most especially the impact of other car traffic, delays caused by cyclists are arguably negligible. As we are told about workplace sexual harrassment, it's not about sex, it's about power. I firmly believe that on the road, it's not about time, it's about power. Whether consciously or not, many drivers simply don't want to cede space to cyclists on the road, and see their presence as a challenge to their ownership or dominance of this resource. In response they exercise the superior power their cars give them over unprotected road users. I'd argue this is the key dynamic we need to be aware of in driver-cyclist interaction, and messages engaging with this syndrome should be at the centre of any advertising or education program.