

Personal submission to Vulnerable Road Users Enquiry

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My experience as a cyclist relates to training both solo and in group rides, racing and commuting. On the whole, as evidenced by the fact that I continue to ride with consistent frequency, I believe the differences between motorists and cyclists are limited to a few infrequent conflicts. Most road users are aware of laws and rights and can work together in a manner which does not endanger the lives of vulnerable road users.

Unfortunately, when this is not the case, the conflicts can be exceptionally dangerous and generally fall into three categories.

- Cyclist being verbally abused
- Object being thrown at cyclist
- Motor vehicle used as weapon to intimidate or intentionally cause injury to cyclist.

Sometimes a cyclist can unwittingly spark the exchange through a perceived indiscretion that upsets the motorist, but quite often these exchanges can be completely random and are the product of a motorists' perception that cyclists are somehow riding illegitimately on the road that registered motorists have the sole rights for. Another reason is often a perception that a cyclist is delaying the progress of the motorist, which they have no right to do. This is often exacerbated by a feeling that all cyclists should use cycle paths where provided.

The main danger to vulnerable road users where there is scope for action can be narrowed down to addressing the aggressive behaviour of motorists towards cyclists. As mentioned, this behaviour stems from a belief that cyclists have no place on the road, or have no right to be delaying, even for a matter of seconds, the progress of a motorist. Having read a number of comments pages on a number of news articles or blogs on the internet, and having been the subject of such road rage and verbal abuse, I have managed to narrow down the possible reasons to these two main objections.

Sadly, when a conflict between a cyclist and a motorist occur and it is reported, it ends up being "their word against yours" and little action is taken. This approach takes out of the equation that the cyclist has a lot more to lose in a conflict than a motorist and therefore is far less likely to get in a situation where conflict occurs. In addition, the more the media reports on conflicts between parties, the more the perception that there is a war occurring between the two parties is reinforced, which then increases the likelihood of further conflict.

From my own personal experiences, there have been a few instances where my life was deliberately placed in danger by a motorist that I would like to share as examples of this aggressive attitude:

- 2012: Riding down Mugga Way in a group of 6, two abreast on the left side of the road leaving plenty of room on what is a very wide road. Utility overtakes and a half full can of soft drink is thrown at the lead riders. Amazingly, it passes between my wheels and falls behind the rider to my left. This was the first and only contact we had had with this vehicle.
- 8th Oct, 2013: Riding within the cycle lane on Northbourne heading north riding with a friend two abreast. Bus driver honks at us, makes no effort to change his position in his lane to

offer us room despite lack of traffic around the bus. We overtake when he stops at a bus stop and continue, only to be passed again, this time within 5cm of my right elbow with the wheels of the bus on or just within the lines, but the side of the bus over the line in the cycle lane with no cars to the right of the bus. This was witnessed by all passengers on the bus, of which two have stepped forward as witnesses in a police investigation.

- 2011: Riding along Uriarra Rd heading towards Uriarra Crossing with a friend riding two abreast on a long straight quiet road. Driver honks from a distance and drives close to my right side. Vehicle is a 4wd with a trailer carrying a 4wd. Trailer is swaying side to side and I have to move off my line to avoid being hit by trailer forcing my friend onto the dirt shoulder.

The issue in all these examples is that there was a perception of ownership of the road or a perception that we were somehow doing the wrong thing in being there. This was a justification for potentially risking wellbeing or a life.

What none of the drivers in situations where riders are deliberately intimidated through driving at close proximity realise is that often a cyclist will need to change line to avoid a pothole, obstacle (branch, rock, glass) or give another rider a little room. Riders naturally alter line a little when riding anyway. In either case, altering line in a reasonable manner is completely within the legal rights of a cyclist and shouldn't pose any risk where road users are operating their vehicle with due care. In some cases, even a change of line of as little as 10-20cm would have resulted in a collision where the rider would have ended up far worse off than the motorist.

I believe part of the solution comes back to education and regulation. Firstly, there needs to be a program which serves to promote cyclists as people with families, rather than inconvenient objects. In addition, it should be promoted that cyclists have a legal right to use the roads and have the same rights protecting their well being as any other road user. In most situations where I have been directly targeted by motorists, the most important message I wanted to give them was the fact that I have two young children under the age of 5 and that their behaviour would affect people beyond the cyclist, and all for a prejudice.

Secondly, all road users need to be educated regarding the laws relating to all road users, where the rights of cyclists and laws specific to cyclists on the road are spelled out and myths and misconceptions are highlighted and rectified. This includes the legalities of riding two abreast and choosing to use the road rather than an off road path. This particularly applies to the perception of being delayed on a journey by needing to slow down for a short period to ensure the safety of the person riding the bike.

Equally, cyclists should be educated about the risks of behaviours while using the roads and about the importance of obeying road rules as a road user. In addition, they should be educated about being considerate road users and yielding the right to riding two abreast where safe when traffic is being delayed for a longer period of time. In my experience, this education amongst cyclists occurs in most group rides where new members to a bunch ride learn from the experience of their more experienced counterparts.

Thirdly, regulation should be introduced, as has been instituted in Europe, whereby a mandatory distance of 1-1.5m is given to cyclists when passing, regardless of if a motorist needs to temporarily

slow down to ensure safe passage around the cyclist. With stiff penalties commensurate with endangering life, similar to those relating to negligent driving, this aggressive behaviour would reduce, especially if accompanied by an education program including print, TV and internet media. This suggestion is entirely in line with the "Minimum Overtaking Distance" proposal by bicycle advocacy organisation "Amy Gillett Foundation" (<http://www.amygillett.org.au/minimum-overtaking-distance>).

Furthermore, a system whereby the vulnerable person's point of view is given more weight in assessing fault would be helpful in identifying aggressive patterns of behaviour and sending out a message that the actions are unacceptable. While both parties can contribute to a conflict, often where there is so much to lose on the part of the cyclist, their point of view should be heard. Allowing an incident to be dismissed as "their word against yours" only serves to reinforce the unfortunate perception amongst this group of motorists that cyclists have no rights. Where dangerous aggressive driving risks the life of a road user, the original cause of the conflict is completely irrelevant, as is the case with road rage incidents between motorists.

Ultimately, road usage is something that needs to be respected by all parties and it is this central message that should be promoted. Highlighting possible consequences of actions like has been historically done with the issues of speed and driver fatigue and backing that up with legislation is crucial.