

Study calls attention to cyclist-motorist collisions

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While deaths from cyclist-motorist collisions are relatively rare, nearly half of them can be attributed to driver fault and following too closely, according to Western researchers.

"The most important takeaway is 43 per cent of cyclists that were killed were hit from behind," said Rebecca Henderson, a Ph.D. Candidate in Health Sciences, whose research team spent two years examining pre-emptive causes and [risk factors](#) related to 131 reported [cycling](#) deaths in Ontario between 2010 and 2015.

Of the 131 [cyclist](#) deaths, 114 were male, while adults represented 87 per cent of the fatalities. Frequency of collisions peaked in July, August and September, with 99 deaths occurring between April and September. The majority of cycling deaths occurred during clear weather, on dry roads, with good visibility, Henderson said. Fatalities were high at intersections and police reports indicated traffic volumes and speed, blind spots and encroachment were aggravating factors.

While Henderson's study looked at other risk factors in fatal collisions between a motorist and a cyclist – including helmet use, distractions and riding/driving while under the influence of drugs or alcohol – two key messages stand out from her study, she noted.

"If I were to give one recommendation to motorists, it's to be aware you are killing cyclists when you hit them from behind," Henderson stressed.

"Drivers are getting too close to people riding bikes. There's a lack of education about getting too close to cyclists. I don't think people understand the laws around that – you need to give one metre of space when passing. It's a law that came into effect Sept. 1, 2015. You can move into the other lane; those lines are there to help you. You do need to move over. There could be more education on that."

As for the cyclists, the best advice she can give is to be visible when you are on the road.

"A recommendation to cyclists is to wear high-visibility clothing. Many drivers in my study reported failing to see cyclist before the crash. Sometimes there was sun in their eyes, or a glare. Sometimes it was them saying, 'I just didn't see the cyclist.' There is a responsibility of the driver to be aware of the cyclist, but other studies talk about wearing bright colours, using neon ankle markings to draw attention to cyclists because it creates movement. Even on a sunny July day, if you're wearing a white shirt, you're not going to stand out," Henderson explained.

London is what she called "an emerging cycling city," not as developed as Toronto or Ottawa, but with a cycling master plan, an advisory committee and a local advocacy group – the London Cycle Link – plans are in the works to generate safer cycling infrastructure in the city. A recent influx of more than \$2 million from the Ontario Municipal Commuter Cycling Program helped London bridge the gaps on its Thames Valley Parkway path system.

"We could do more, but we are making the right steps in the right directions and I think there is a community will, and I do believe there is a political will," Henderson said.

But until something like separated bike lanes are a reality, it's important to keep a few things in mind, she noted. There is no dichotomy to be

made between bicycles and cars on the road; it's not about stressing the use of one vehicle over another. Motorists need to remember cyclists are people – adults and children of all ages, riding for various purposes on the road.

We need to build motorist awareness of the one-metre passing law and educate motorists about the risks associated with passing cyclists without enough space, she added. Risks associated with intersections need to be front of mind for all, and cyclists need to be aware of the dangers of cycling without safety equipment and while under the influence.

Henderson's study also encourages the policing of dangerous driving practices, including the one-metre passing law, the enforcement of existing conspicuity laws and bylaws (e.g. having lights and reflectors installed on bicycles) and the enforcement of helmet laws in children under the age of 18. She also recommends providing helmets to individuals who cannot afford one.

"It's spring. Remember that cyclists are people riding bikes and there is a risk of being hit from behind. Please move over. Cycling deaths are really rare. The takeaway is not to create fear of cycling; it's not to say cycling isn't safe. The message is we can make cycling safer by helping motorists pass cyclists safely and cyclists can help motorists to better see them on the road."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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