

Bicycle Helmet Laws, Safety-in-Numbers, and Bikeshares

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Abstract

Active transportation (walking and bicycling) dramatically improves wellbeing through mechanisms from the direct health benefits of exercise, to empowerment, social equity, childhood cognitive development, resilience, pollution reduction, and sustainability. The number of cyclists is strongly correlated with the safety of cyclists, and there are both mechanistic and empirical reasons to expect safety-numbers causality in both directions on various timescales. Interventions to make bicycles easily available to all, such as provided by bikeshares, can trigger rapid beneficial mode shifts.

Helmet laws protect some cyclists during collisions, but reduce the number of trips by bicycle, at the expense of safety-in-numbers. The hypothesis is that this short-term effect activates several longer-term reinforcing feedbacks. We sketch some likely causal loops linking bicycling safety-in-numbers, bikeshares, and helmet laws, to life expectancy. At best, helmet laws slow and limit bicycle adoption, and at worst they push bicycle modeshare into a death spiral. The results presented here are not intended to be predictive, but rather to demonstrate a potentially dangerous system behaviour, and to motivate more detailed study.

1 Introduction

Urban transportation systems designed around the bicycle show high potential for simultaneous co-optimisation of health, wellbeing, social justice, climate change prevention, resilience, childhood cognitive development, good use of urban public space, local air quality, global sustainability. . . [WCA and ECF, 2016; Macmillan et al., 2020]

This paper sketches how some areas of bicycling science that have been studied in isolation, but which exhibit unexplored dynamics when coupled:

- As more people choose to bike, safety and convenience improve. This appears to be due to various factors: in the short term drivers become accustomed to operating safely around bicycles, and in the long term support for bicycle-specific infrastructure increases both safety and convenience.
- Danger and inconvenience are often cited as the main reasons people choose not to bike [Claudy and Peterson, 2014; Daley and Rissel, 2011; Macmillan and Woodcock, 2017; Branion-Calles et al., 2019].
- Bikeshare systems lower the barriers to bicycling for new or occasional riders, potentially leading to a rapid increase in ridership.

- In a serious crash or collision with a motor vehicle, bicycle helmets reduce the risk of certain kinds of injury. At the same time, helmet requirements cause some fraction of people not to bike. This especially limits bikeshare use.

Efforts to increase cyclist safety generally follow two approaches. One approach focuses on transportation system design: since most serious bicycle injuries and fatalities are caused by collisions with cars, the emphasis is on reducing the kinetic risks posed by cars, e.g., through physical separation and lower car speed limits. Another common-sense approach observes that some deaths are caused by brain injuries, and seeks to protect brains by encouraging or forcing cyclists to wear helmets. These two approaches are often framed as complementary, and it is often argued that greater efforts should be made to increase helmet use, especially among bikeshare riders, where helmet use is especially low (e.g. [Graves et al. \[2014\]](#); [Chen et al. \[2021\]](#)).

While each safety intervention has been studied in depth, the temporal dynamics of interactions between them have largely been neglected. This paper investigates the consequences of increasing cyclist safety primarily through the safety-in-numbers effect [[Robinson, 2006](#); [Elvik and Goel, 2019](#)]. The hypothesis is that when the number of cyclists increases, drivers learn to accommodate cyclists, making cycling safer, which encourages more people to bike, creating demand for more bike-friendly infrastructure, which allows more trips to be made by bike (the emergence of those opposing good bicycling infrastructure is a damping influence, but will be ignored in the present work). Conversely, requiring helmets reduces the number of trips by bicycle, for reasons of inconvenience, discomfort, money, ideology, helmet-hair, etc. This effect is especially damaging for bike-sharing systems.

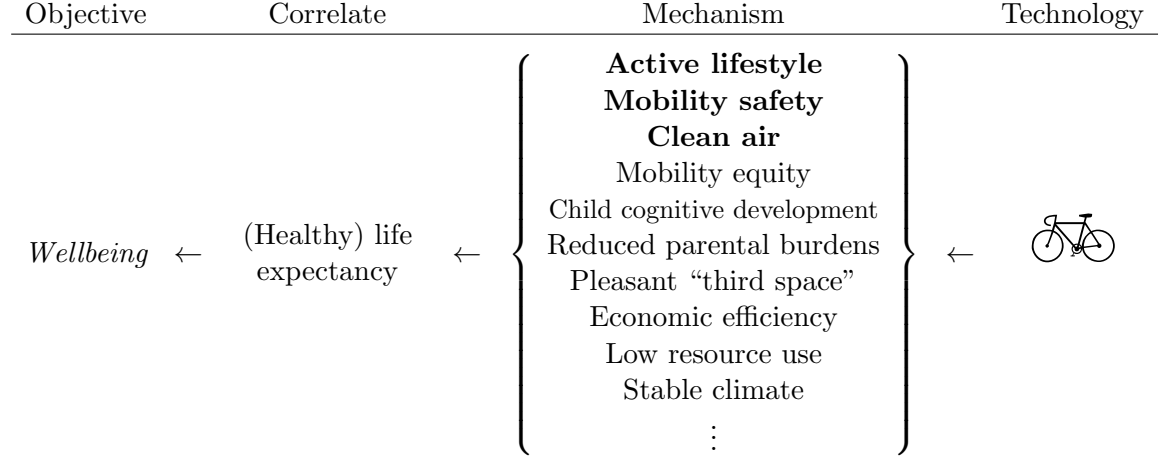
By reducing these interactions to three representative feedback loops, we show how policies that increase the number of cyclists can exponentially increase cyclist safety. In contrast, not only can helmets never improve safety by more than a constant factor, but helmet requirements also activate these feedback loops in the opposite direction, with the unintended consequence of exponentially increasing risk to cyclists.

2 Background

We assume that the goal of policy is to increase access to *intrinsic goods*—things that are *good for their own sake* rather than proxy quantities, and that society-wide wellbeing metrics or average healthspan measures such as QALY/DALY/LEGP approach this ideal. While there is more to life than not being dead, we take life expectancy as sufficiently close to an intrinsic good, since it is highly correlated with the more sophisticated wellbeing metrics and easier to measure.

Active transportation can improve social equity, access to community resources such as education and food, air quality, climate stability, universal autonomy, childhood cognitive development, economic productivity, etc... [[WCA and ECF, 2016](#); [Macmillan et al., 2020](#); [Bruntlett and Bruntlett, 2021](#)] We consider these not to be ends in themselves, but rather proxy goods to the extent that they facilitate wellbeing. Similarly, encouraging bicycling is valuable because of the many mechanisms by which it improves

wellbeing / healthspan (which we approximate here as life expectancy) of the average member of the population:



We focus on the first three (boldfaced) mechanisms. The remaining ones are connected to healthspan and wellbeing, but quantitative research on effect sizes is lacking. Due to the bicycle’s versatility, popularity, benefit/cost ratio, and interdependence with mobility infrastructure, we focus on cycling as a good indicator of active transportation (cycling, walking, running, handcycles, wheelchairs, etc...). And because, compared to private ownership, bikeshare systems greatly lower the barriers to entry, we focus on those.

... the major barriers to bikeshare relate to a lack of convenience and competitive advantage with other modes, safety concerns and anything that impedes spontaneity. [Fishman, 2016]

2.1 Convenience

Convenience is consistently found to be a primary factor in mode choice [Claudy and Peterson, 2014; Bachand-Marleau et al., 2012; Fishman et al., 2015; Fishman, 2016; Kabra et al., 2020]. Considerations affecting mode choice may include:

- Distance: in many cities, most trips are under 5 kilometres (km), at low speed, and will take a similar amount of time by car or bicycle. The number of such trips is subject to gradual change, through emergent response to demand or intentionally through new city technologies such as 15-Minute Cities [Pouzoukidou and Chatziyiannaki, 2021]. The convenience of longer trips is more dependent on specialised infrastructure such as access to high-average-speed routes or easy integration with public transportation [Jonkeren et al., 2021].
- Terminal costs: time and cost of parking, distance to destination, ability to secure a bicycle vs. theft...
- Perceived safety of the route for the chosen mode.
- Pleasantness of the route for the chosen mode.

- Ability to carry common loads (groceries, children...) through access to functional bicycles (e.g. racks and panniers, cargo bikes...).
- In hot climates, availability of showers or changing rooms.
- Availability of equipment, including bicycles at the location of need and anything required by law (e.g., lights, helmet).

2.1.1 Bikeshares

Whereas bicycle ownership requires overcoming various obstacles to purchase (choice, cost, outfitting), logistics (maintenance, storage), and use (restricted to home-[...]-home trips, concerns anent theft), bikeshare systems [Fishman et al., 2015; Fishman, 2016] that are easy to join and that offer dense coverage [Bachand-Marleau et al., 2012; Kabra et al., 2020] can reduce all of these barriers. When combined with cyclist-friendly infrastructure, they can quickly increase ridership, and can facilitate multimodal trips, and while they compete against public transportation and walking, they can also reduce trips by car [Cheng et al., 2022; Cordeau, 2023].

2.2 Traffic safety

The UK, Germany, Denmark, and the Netherlands kill on the order of one cyclist per 100 million km ridden [Buehler and Pucher, 2021]. At an average moving speed of 20 km/h (reasonable for experienced commuters [Geus et al., 2007]), this is one death every 5 million hours of cycling. If the average age of a cyclist killed in a collision is ~ 25 , and the life expectancy is ~ 80 , then approximately 500,000 life-hours are lost per 5 million.

The USA is more hostile to cyclists: as of Buehler and Pucher’s [2021] analysis, the USA was killing 6 cyclists per 100 million km, and rising. This reduces the benefit/cost ratio, but notably, even in the USA, the benefits generally outweigh the costs (§2.3).

2.2.1 Safety-in-numbers

As the number of cyclists (or, more precisely, bike use) increases, the risk per cyclist decreases. Much research includes car, bike, and pedestrian traffic and examines other factors (see Elvik and Goel’s [2019] comprehensive meta-analysis), but the simplest form suffices here:

$$\frac{\text{number of collisions}}{\text{baseline number of collisions}} \sim \left(\frac{\text{number of cyclists}}{\text{baseline number of cyclists}} \right)^\beta \quad (1)$$

When $\beta < 1$, the number of collisions grows more slowly than the number of cyclists. Elvik and Goel [2019] include studies that put β as low as -0.14 and as high as 0.87. They estimate a city-level average of $\beta \approx 0.25$, but on the scale of individual junctions they find $\beta \approx 0.4$. Using $\beta = 0.4$ as a conservative example, if the number of cyclists (or kilometers cycled) doubles, the number of collisions increases by a factor of only $2^\beta \approx 1.3$, so the risk to each cyclist (or for each km) decreases by $1 - \frac{2^\beta}{2} = 1 - 2^{\beta-1} \approx 34\%$. If $\beta = 0.25$, then if bicycle use doubles, risk goes down by 40%.

Causal directionality is debated. Is the observed effect simply due to more people choosing to bike in response to extrinsic safety improvements—“numbers-in-safety”? [Elvik and Goel \[2019, sec. 5.2\]](#) provide an argument that their results are most consistent with safety-in-numbers, and others (see also §2.1.1) argue persuasively that more cycling immediately raises awareness and teaches motorists what to look for. On long timescales more bicycling creates more pressure for infrastructure improvements [[Macmillan and Woodcock, 2017](#)]. The presence of evidence in both directions supports a feedback model.

A nice piece of evidence was accidentally published by [Graves et al. \[2014\]](#) in an article arguing for more helmet use. Their data on 5 intervention and 5 control cities show that in cities that implemented or greatly expanded their bikeshare systems, rates of serious injuries among cyclists dropped by 28% while rates in control cities increased by 2%—although the authors ignored this result, and it took others to point it out [[Fishman et al., 2015](#)].

We believe that the reasoning behind the safety-in-numbers hypothesis is sufficiently sound, and that there is sufficient supporting evidence, to warrant this investigation of potential consequences.

2.2.2 Perception of safety

The health benefits from active transportation usually outweigh the risks (§2.3.1). But perceptions, not data, drive daily decisions. The choice not to bicycle is often due to a belief that bicycling is dangerous [[Claudy and Peterson, 2014](#); [Carstensen et al., 2014](#); [Aldred and Crosweller, 2015](#); [Fishman, 2016](#); [Macmillan and Woodcock, 2017](#)]. Since statistics generally show that bicycling is safe, we can dismiss the hypothesis that the decision not to bike is based on mortality data.

What, then, generates the perception of safety? Infrastructure such as separated bike lanes [[Branion-Calles et al., 2019](#); [Hardinghaus and Weschke, 2022](#); [Fishman et al., 2015](#); [Fishman, 2016](#); [Manton et al., 2016](#)], slow car traffic [[Hardinghaus and Weschke, 2022](#)], experience [[Fishman, 2016](#); [Manton et al., 2016](#)] informed by direct learning from conflicts with motorists:

Thus in the UK, reported deaths, serious injuries, slight injuries, and self-report injuries might be of the rough magnitude of around 50; 1000; 6000; and 20,000 per billion miles cycled respectively. This research suggests that, per billion miles cycled, one might by contrast expect 25,000,000 ‘very scary’ near miss incidents—a completely different metric and one that can contribute to our understanding of why people apparently over-estimate the risks of cycling. [[Aldred and Crosweller, 2015](#)]

It also seems likely that the presence of cyclists serves not just to make the system safer, but also as a vote of confidence in the system.¹

It has been argued that since helmets are worn for dangerous sports but not for most transportation modes, requiring helmets on bicycles sends the signal that, unlike

¹Perhaps especially when cyclists match the observer’s demographic, or come from vulnerable groups.

“regular” transportation, bicycling carries risk on par with dangerous sports [Gerhard, 2023]. However, since the psychological effect size is unknown, we do not include this separately, but assume that the decrease in bicycling due to helmet laws includes this effect.

2.2.3 Helmets

The degree to which helmets protect cyclists is controversial. Few analyses do a convincing job of controlling for exposure or other concurrent traffic-safety interventions. Still fewer take into account the fact that severe head injuries are rare in the first place, so any cost-benefit analysis finds little benefit [Taylor and Scuffham, 2002; Robinson, 2007; de Jong, 2012]. Rather than reviewing that literature, we note that the debate is far from settled, so we will sidestep it entirely by assuming that helmets provide perfect protection against all possible head injuries (§3.2.1).

Helmet laws reduce the amount of bicycling. While the size of the effect is also debated, plausible estimates for users of their own bikes are that an enforced helmet law reduces the number of bicycle trips by 10–40% [Komanoff, 2001; Robinson, 2006; Rissel and Wen, 2011; Hoye, 2018; Gerhard, 2023]. The effect on bikeshares is more extreme [Fishman et al., 2015; Fishman, 2016], and indeed bikeshares in areas with helmet laws struggle to attract riders. This paper partially sidesteps the problem of establishing effect size: due to system feedbacks, even a small impact on cycling is amplified over time. However, more research is required.

Developing Komanoff’s [2001] suggestion, de Jong [2012] showed that even under unrealistically optimistic assumptions about helmet effectiveness, the small decrease in ridership caused by helmet laws increases the burden of diseases of inactivity to the point that it usually overwhelms the gains achieved by perfect helmets. Here, we consider how safety-in-numbers feedbacks might amplify this effect over time.

2.3 Health

2.3.1 Diseases of inactivity

While lethal cycling collisions are spectacular, they are rare: the leading causes of death are lifestyle diseases caused primarily by lack of physical activity.² The physical and mental health benefits of frequent activity (functional movement, play, exercise...) reduce the prevalence and severity of many—even most—diseases [WHO, 2010; Reimers et al., 2012; DHHS, 2018; Lieberman, 2021; Garcia et al., 2023], arguably including ageing itself: at the volumes and intensities typical of transportation (4–7 METs [Geus et al., 2007; Herrmann et al., 2024]), 1 hour of cycling yields a life expectancy gain of ~2–3 hours (broadly consistent with the typical finding that 150 minutes/week of moderate exercise increases life expectancy by 3 years, assuming the habit is maintained for 50 years; see also [Leskinen et al., 2018; Yang, 2019]). The greatest gains are at the lowest levels—those going from no activity to a small amount [Powell et al., 2019;

²The burden of lifestyle diseases due to diet is comparable, but it is beyond the scope of this work.

[Garcia et al., 2023], which amplifies the public-health effects of bikeshares if they nudge occasional trips—but the benefits continue to accrue at much higher doses [DHHS, 2018; Lieberman, 2021; Lee et al., 2022].

Recalling §2.2: if 5 million hours of bicycle commuting result in the loss of 500,000 life-hours due to fatal collisions, but the recovery of ~ 15 million life-hours by treating lifestyle diseases, then the expected gain is 30 times greater than the loss. This simplistic calculation yields a number roughly consistent with those from more sophisticated analyses [de Hartog et al., 2010; de Jong, 2012; Kelly et al., 2014; Tainio et al., 2016].

2.3.2 Pollution

Air pollution from fossil fuels may decrease life expectancy by an average of ~ 1 year worldwide [Lelieveld et al., 2020], and can be many times higher in densely populated areas. Not all of this is caused by personal vehicles, so the potential life expectancy gain at optimistic levels of modeshare shift (at least in regions with strong tailpipe emissions laws) might be on the order of minutes per day—for all individuals rather than just those who bike. Vehicles also make a significant contribution to non-exhaust particulates [Oroumihyeh and Zhu, 2021], including toxic compounds from e.g. tire and brake dust, but we do not include this. Cyclists consume more car pollution than motorists, but de Hartog et al. [2010] found that the benefits usually outweigh the risks. We note that the health effects of stricter tailpipe emissions controls may be amplified not only by increasing the cost of cars, but also through the feedback loop reducing the pollution disincentive of bicycling, but we leave this as future work.

3 Methods

We present a differential-equation (compartment) model³ that simulates the evolution of the population-wide outcome of interest. Life expectancy increases due to the light exercise provided by bicycling (assuming that our baseline is the current prevalence of diseases of inactivity), and decreases due to air pollution and deadly collisions. The model represents average (probabilistic) travel behaviour—so, for example, the average change in life expectancy is the change expected due to making a trip by bicycle multiplied by the probability of a trip being made by bicycle.

We will assume that, on average, one hour per day is dedicated to transportation. This is broadly consistent with average commute times worldwide. The faster people can travel, the greater their tolerance for commute distance, consistent with induced demand and the fact that our lives are limited not in distance but in time. Probably coincidentally, if commuting uses an active mode, this number aligns well with health recommendations (§2.3.1).

A trip is made by bicycle if that is the most convenient option, not seen as too risky, and the traveller has access to the equipment (private or public bike, and helmet

³The Vensim model `sin.mdl` is at https://github.com/bwpearre/public/tree/main/2024-08_ISDC

if required). Otherwise the trip is made by car.⁴ Thus we have (ignoring helmets for now):

$$\Pr(\text{bike}) = \Pr(\text{convenient}) \Pr(\neg \text{deterred by risk} \mid \text{access to bike}) \Pr(\text{access})$$

For example, if bicycling is the most convenient mode for 20% of trips, 10% of the population has access to a bike, and those believe that half of all trips are sufficiently safe, then 1% of trips will be made by bike.

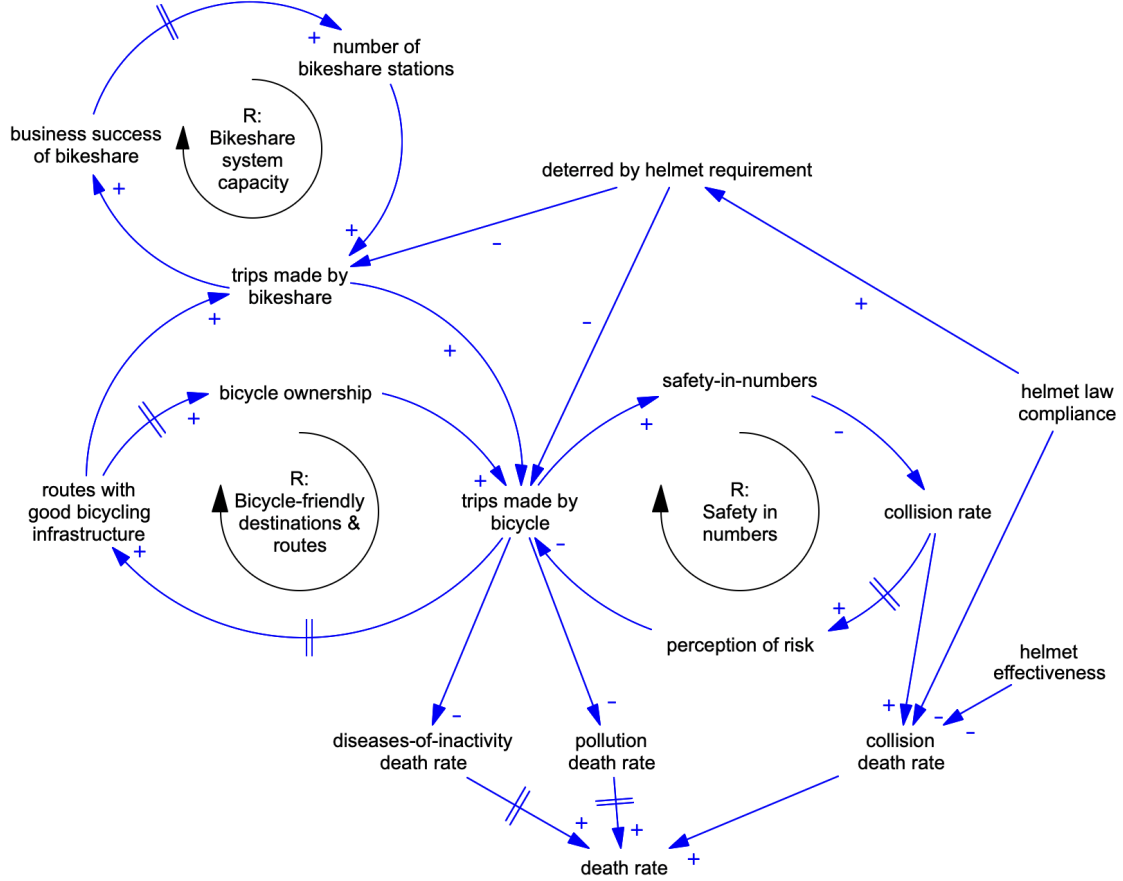


Figure 1: Causal-loop diagram: the modelled relationships between cycling and death rate.

A simplified causal-loop diagram is shown in Fig. 1, sketching how the model connects these factors. Crucially, we assume that more bicycling leads to increased safety (§2.2.1).

Working through an example, if a bicycle helmet law reduces the number of bike trips by 20% (§2.2.3), assuming from §2.2.1 $\beta = 0.4$, then the risk of collision per kilometre increases by $0.8^{\beta-1} \approx 14\%$. Assuming helmets prevent 100% of deaths due to head injury ($\sim 25\%$ of all cyclist deaths), the risk of death per km would initially decrease

⁴Not modelled here: it has been observed that when public transportation is available, bicycles compete with that as well as with cars, but see Cordeau [2023].

by $1 - (0.75 \cdot 1.14) \approx 14\%$. Meanwhile, the 14% increase in crashes and close calls per km would scare more potential cyclists away, leading to a further increase in risk for those who remain. Decreased demand for all kinds of cyclist-friendly infrastructure (§2.1) gradually makes it less likely that a bicycle will be the most convenient mode for any given trip. Most importantly, as physical activity slowly declines, so does life expectancy.

3.1 State variables

3.1.1 Convenience

One probability, $\text{Pr}(\text{trip is most convenient by bike})$, represents all of the factors describe in §2.1. We assume that the aggregate of these factors responds slowly to changing demand, and that if infrastructure is not maintained, it slowly decays over time. There will always be some trips that are inconvenient by bicycle, so we cap convenience at 70%, perhaps achievable with mature implementations of the 15-Minute City [Moreno et al., 2021; Pozoukidou and Chatziyiannaki, 2021] or Superblocks [Mueller et al., 2020]. We note that this may lead to both induced bicycle traffic and induced demand [Lee et al., 1999] but leave this effect for future work.

3.1.2 Safety and risk

In the model, only the safety-in-numbers effect controls the rate of potentially deadly collisions (§2.2.1). The probability of death given a severe collision is only affected by helmet use and effectiveness.

As described in §2.2.2, we assume that perceived risk rises and falls with actual risk, following Eq. 1 with an information delay. We choose a baseline in range with reported values (e.g. [Aldred and Croweller, 2015; Fishman et al., 2015]): the initial probability of non-cyclists being deterred by potential risks $\text{Pr}(\text{deterred by risk} \mid \text{no bike access}) = 0.7$. Those who have access to a bike are less likely to be deterred by danger than those who do not [Fishman et al., 2015], so:

$$\text{Pr}(\text{deterred by risk} \mid \text{bike access}) = 0.7 \cdot \text{Pr}(\text{deterred by risk} \mid \text{no bike access})$$

How to estimate the effect of perceived risk on behaviour? Since even a small absolute risk has a high probability of deterring a bike trip, and since multiplying a probability by a scalar is not valid, we use the odds ratio:

$$\frac{\text{Pr}(\text{deterred}) / \text{Pr}(\neg \text{deterred})}{\text{Pr}_{\text{base}}(\text{deterred}) / \text{Pr}_{\text{base}}(\neg \text{deterred})} = \frac{\text{Pr}(\text{crash}) / \text{Pr}(\neg \text{crash})}{\text{Pr}_{\text{base}}(\text{crash}) / \text{Pr}_{\text{base}}(\neg \text{crash})}$$

Safety-in-numbers and helmet laws interact through perceived risk and ability and willingness to bike. Unrealistically, infrastructure improvements are not taken to directly improve safety, simply because the number of additional free parameters exceeds the number of papers examining the relationship. Rather, in this simplified model, infrastructure leads to greater safety only because more convenient bicycle routes enhance

safety through numbers. We also ignore the potential vote-of-confidence (bandwagon) effect of seeing many other cyclists on the road. Both of these effects would have the same structure as the safety-in-numbers perception, albeit probably with different time constants.

3.1.3 Access to a bicycle

Bicycles can be privately owned, or borrowed through a bikeshare. Each time a trip is most convenient by bicycle and the potential rider is not deterred by safety concerns, a bike owner or bikeshare member will bike, and someone without access will, with some probability, join a bikeshare if one is available, or (generally with much lower probability (§2.1.1)), buy a bike. These are treated as uncorrelated: bikeshare members can also be bike owners. Bikeshare memberships are maintained in proportion to the probability that they are used, and unused private bikes slowly rust (artificially, at a rate equal to the initial rate of acquisition).

For a non-cyclist, the initial decision to bike is a big step both psychologically and materially. Once that step has been taken, further trips by bike are more likely [Fishman et al., 2015]. We have not modelled this explicitly, but note that recent riding closely parallels the risk-assessment structure described in §3.1.2: the initial decision to arrange access to a bicycle is an excellent proxy for the decision to make a first trip by bike, and thus the deterrence factor described above could contain both of these effects.

3.1.4 Bikeshare system capacity

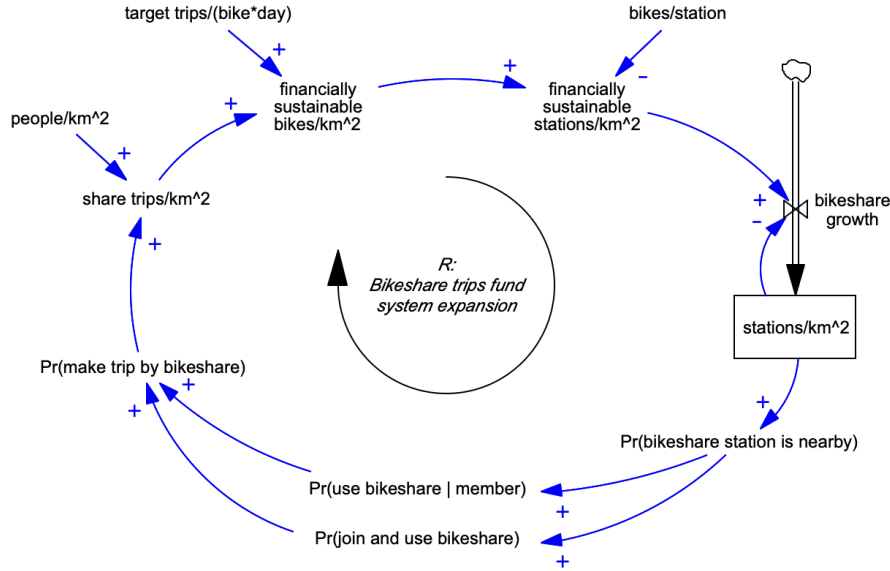


Figure 2: The bikeshare model expands and contracts continuously in response to demand, with the goal that each bike will serve e.g. 4 trips/day.

Well-appointed bikeshares drastically lower barriers of entry for would-be cyclists due to their low upfront cost and potential availability for any segment of a trip.

By default, the model assumes that a bikeshare is introduced to the world at a certain time, with some initial station density δ (e.g. $\delta = 1$ station/km²).

What is the probability that a bikeshare bike is nearby? [Kabra et al. \[2020\]](#) find a linear decrease in bikeshare utility of 0.194%/m as a user needs to walk up to 300 m, and a much steeper one beyond that. We take 200 m to be a reasonable average for our simple threshold model. Using the L_1 norm, this suggests that a bikeshare station serves 0.08 km², and thus the probability of a station within 200 m is 0.08δ . To account for imperfect tiling and to constrain probabilities to $[0, 1]$ we somewhat arbitrarily use $\tanh(\cdot)$.

$$\Pr(\text{bikeshare is nearby}) = \tanh(0.08 \delta)$$

$$\frac{\text{bikeshare trips}}{\text{km}^2 \cdot \text{day}} = \frac{\text{population}}{\text{km}^2} \cdot \frac{\text{trips}}{\text{day}} \cdot \Pr(\text{would use bikeshare}) \cdot \Pr(\text{bikeshare is nearby})$$

$\Pr(\text{would use bikeshare})$ varies with perceived risk and convenience infrastructure. Eye-balling data published in [\[Fishman, 2016\]](#), we assume that as demand varies, the density δ of bikeshare locations in the system is increased or decreased until each bicycle is serving e.g. 4 trips/day. We deal only with station-based bikeshares with a fixed number of bikes (by default, 10) per station, and make the optimistic assumption that bikeshare stations are always suitably stocked. [Freund et al. \[2019\]](#) provide a thorough review of the literature on rebalancing, and [Kabra et al. \[2020\]](#) describe interesting relationships between the number of bikes at a station and the decision and habituation processes of potential users: is it worth going to the bikeshare in hopes of finding a working bike? We leave these refinements for future work.

Different bikeshare systems offer different levels of convenience of joining and use [\[Fishman, 2016\]](#), represented as $\Pr(\text{join bikeshare} \mid \text{want})$, which multiplies

$$\Pr(\text{most convenient by bike}) \Pr(\neg \text{deterred by risk}) \Pr(\neg \text{bikeshare member})$$

to produce a probability per day of joining the bikeshare. Helmet laws further modulate this probability as described in §3.2.1.

3.2 Interventions

3.2.1 Helmets

A helmet law changes the average cyclist’s behaviour to some degree $\lambda \in [0 \dots 1]$, from $\lambda = 0$ (no behavioural effect) to 1 (absolute respect for the law). The present model ignores the fact that some cyclists already wear helmets and will likely not change their behaviour in response to a law. The error thus introduced would have an effect on the numeric predictions of a data-calibrated model, but matters little for the system behaviours shown here—especially since so few bikeshare riders wear helmets [\[Fishman et al., 2015\]](#).

We dodge the debate on how effective helmets may be by making an assumption that maximally favours helmet laws: “idealised” helmets that entirely eliminate lethal head trauma—roughly 25% of all serious cyclist injuries [de Jong, 2012; Graves et al., 2014]. This assumption is for devil’s-advocate realism, but as we will see, even “magical” helmets that prevent 100% of all cyclist deaths do not significantly affect the results.

Helmet laws affect bike owners and bikeshare members differently. Owners are deterred from making a trip by bike with a low probability 0.2λ (from a conservative reading of [Robinson, 2006]), whereas potential bikeshare riders are far more likely to be deterred since they are prohibited from making spontaneous trips [Fishman et al., 2015; Fishman, 2016]. A different factor (by default 0.8λ) controls this, and helmet requirements probably deter first-time bikeshare users even more severely (default 0.9λ). The size of the deterrent effect of helmets is poorly studied and tightly linked to other agendas, but our qualitative results hold if helmets disincentivise cycling at all.

4 Results

In these example scenarios, convenience infrastructure responds to demand, which responds to perceived safety, which follows actual safety-in-numbers (Fig. 1). The time constants are somewhat arbitrary, so the time scale is useful for comparison to other results, but not predictive of absolute change rates. However, while some parameters—especially rates of change—are uncertain, every effort has been made to use published values, especially for safety and health outcomes.

4.1 A bikeshare is introduced, no helmets required

Assume an initially steady scenario in which a constant 10% of people own bikes, 20% of trips are most convenient by bike, and safety concerns and access barriers result in the bicycle being chosen for 1% of trips. At 10,000 cycling hours between crashes (typical for the USA), our initial lifespan benefit of bicycling is around 8 times greater than the risk (probably an unusually pessimistic starting point—see (§2.2). Collisions and pollution kill a few people, but averaged across the whole population, the trips by bicycle still raise the population average life expectancy by a minute per day above that of a car-only city. This is the starting point of Fig. 3.

On day 200 a bikeshare system is introduced, which makes bicycles more easily available. In Fig. 3’s “join convenience: 10%” scenario, the bikeshare is easy enough to use that 10% of people who notice that biking would be the most convenient mode for a given trip, and are not deterred by danger, obtain a membership, after which they are likely to use the system when convenient and safe. At an initial density of one station per km^2 , only around 8% of people are within 200 m of a station when they need it. For these people, due to the low barrier of entry, membership grows, allowing the installation of more stations, serving a greater number of people. As the equipment barrier is removed and more trips are made by bike, responsive improvements to infrastructure encourage more people to organise access to bikes. At the same time,

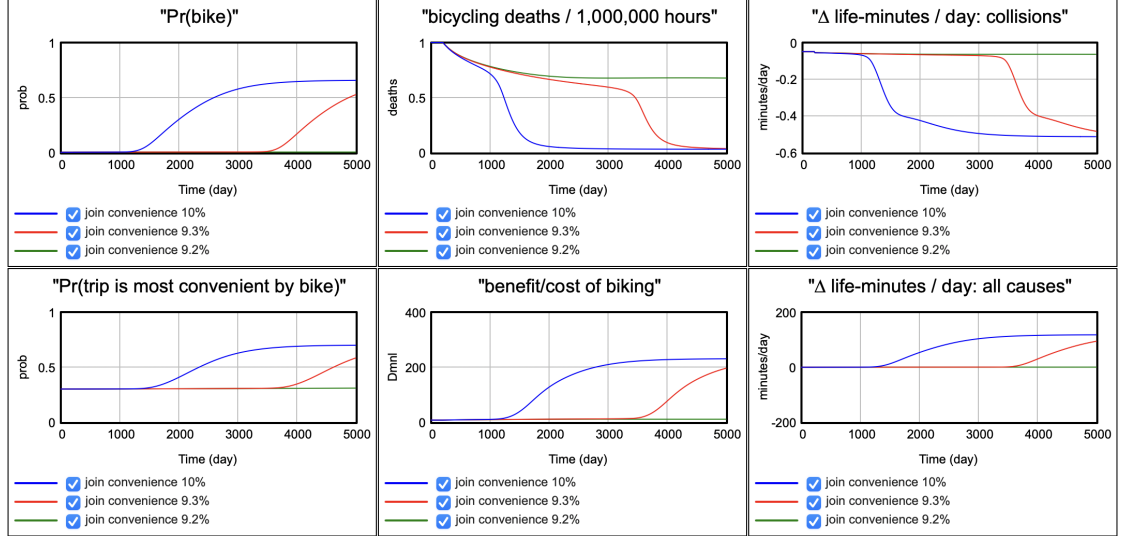


Figure 3: Introduction of a bikeshare on day 200. Under default assumptions (base), the system improves slowly at first, followed by s-curve growth as the feedback loops activate each other. Behaviour is sensitive to many parameters; here we vary the convenience of joining the bikeshare. As this is reduced from 10%, the dynamics change gradually at first, but a sharp boundary appears around 9.3%, below which the bikeshare system does not attract enough members to maintain itself or stimulate significant infrastructure improvements. The graphs show: *Pr(bike)*: the probability that any trip will be made by bike. *Pr(trip is most convenient by bike)*: the probability that any trip is most convenient by bike. *bicycling deaths / 1,000,000 hours*: the expected number of cyclist deaths in traffic for every million hours of bicycle travel time. *benefit/cost of biking*: life expectancy gain (exercise) / loss (fatal collisions). *Δ life-minutes / day: collisions*: If $\beta > 0$, then more bicycling leads to more crashes (§2.2.1, here $\beta = 0.4$), and thus to more “newsworthy deaths”—which should be compared to *Δ life-minutes / day: all causes*: combining life expectancy change due to traffic deaths, air pollution, and light exercise from cycling, distributed over the whole population.

real and perceived risks decline, encouraging further growth. As mobility infrastructure changes to cater to this new mode, bicycling becomes the most convenient mode for more trips, equipment barriers are further reduced, risk declines to less than a tenth of its initial value, and the probability of choosing to bike approaches its maximum (it is limited to 70% as noted in §3.1.1). Pollution declines (not shown, as it tracks *Pr(bike)*), but we estimate that it contributes under a minute/day, although this varies drastically across cities and countries. When 70% of trips are by bike, safety has improved to the point that the lifespan gains due to exercise are over 200 times greater than the costs due to risk of fatal collision. Distributing the costs and benefits over the whole population, life expectancy of the average resident increases by two hours every day.

4.1.1 Instability and convergence

This model starts in an unstable equilibrium, and is nudged by the introduction of the bikeshare system. The feedbacks between convenience (infrastructure) and safety may attract enough new riders to support the bikeshare system’s maintenance needs, but this outcome depends on many of the model’s parameters.

For example, three values of *join convenience* (“Pr(join share | want)”) in the model, representing how easy it is to join the bikeshare) are shown in Fig. 3. Below 9.3% the rate of people joining the bikeshare dips below the rate of people who let their memberships lapse. Ridership shrinks, the safety-in-numbers effect is reduced, and the bikeshare system deteriorates.

In this case, the short-lived demand-driven investment in convenience infrastructure can inspire a few people to buy their own bicycles. Even after the collapse of the bike-share, this additional ridership can, in the absence of any disincentive, drive the system towards the bike-friendly stable state. But the higher cost of entry and lower convenience of personal bicycles make this happen far more slowly (and far less equitably).

If risk is driven down by safety-in-numbers and bike supply rises to meet demand, asymptotic behaviour is governed by the maximum number of trips that are most convenient by bike. Many of the model’s parameters change only the speed of convergence to this eventual stable state.

4.2 Introduction of helmet law

Fig. 4 shows a scenario initially similar to §4.1, with the bikeshare introduced on day 1. On day 3000, a mandatory helmet law is introduced. Many would-be spontaneous cyclists now find themselves downtown without a helmet. At 70% law compliance, ridership immediately drops by over 50%, so with $\beta = 0.4$ the collision risk to the remaining cyclists rises by around 50%. Helmets temper the blow—risk of death only increases by $\sim 25\%$. However, in this example the discouragement of active transportation reduces the potential life expectancy gain from almost 120 to 50 minutes per day. With 100% law compliance, the further reduction in cycling exaggerates the result—reducing life-expectancy gains to only ~ 23 minutes. With magical helmets that prevent *all* cyclist deaths (including, e.g., fatal blows to the torso), with these parameters, the law’s 100-minute/day lifespan reduction is moderated by only ~ 20 seconds.

The new equilibrium seen in Fig. 4 is driven by the fact that biking is still more convenient, safer, and more accessible than it was. As before, asymptotic behaviour is governed by the maximum number of trips that are most convenient by bike. Now convenience is modulated by the probability that a rider—or someone considering joining or using the bikeshare—is carrying a helmet, is willing to risk a police encounter, or does not find rental helmets unappealing.

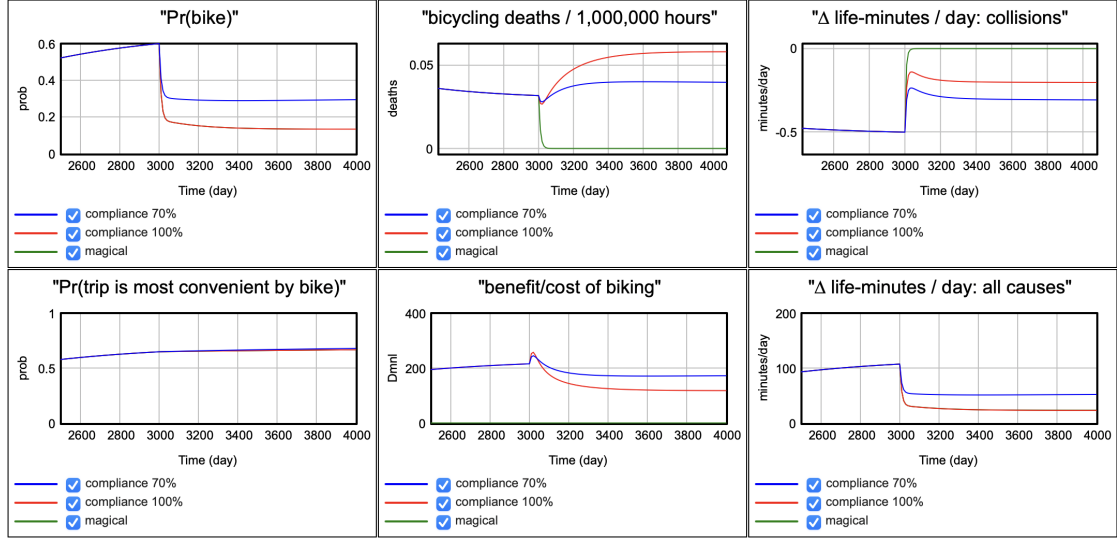


Figure 4: An established bikesharing culture (day 2999) encounters a helmet law on day 3000. Behaviour is shown with 70% and 100% compliance with the law. Also shown: a “magical” scenario, with 100% compliance and helmets that prevent 100% of cycling deaths. For most of the output variables—notably “ Δ life-minutes / day: all causes”—the magical scenario is almost indistinguishable from “100% compliance” with idealised helmets (perfect protection from the $\sim 25\%$ of collisions that involve head injuries §3.2.1). “benefit/cost of biking” goes to ∞ since we are only considering death; if we included serious injury, this would not be the case.

4.2.1 Bistability

The helmet law is a nudge away from bicycling, allowing the feedbacks that previously activated a virtuous cycle of bikeshare availability, safety, convenience, and health to reinforce in the other direction toward an attractor that is hostile to cyclists. The boundary between attractors is determined by many parameters, whose relative importances vary over the parameter space. Compliance with the law usually has a powerful effect, as shown in Fig. 4. Fig. 5 shows another example, in which the growth of a bicycling culture can be merely slowed and handicapped, or even killed entirely, depending on the degree to which bicycling culture has established itself. §4.4 contains a more detailed discussion.

4.3 Helmet law repealed: worse before better

What happens when a helmet law is repealed? This is dangerous—mainly to politicians. The number of lethal collisions—in time, not normalised for exposure—tracks Fig. 6’s “ Δ life-minutes / day: collisions”. The law’s introduction (assuming idealised helmets) reduces the number of these newsworthy deaths. When the law is repealed, the total number of crash fatalities spikes (here, it more than doubles), and (if $\beta > 0$) never returns to the low level seen during the helmet-law era. The size of the effect depends somewhat on the effectiveness of helmets, but is due mostly to the changes in the number

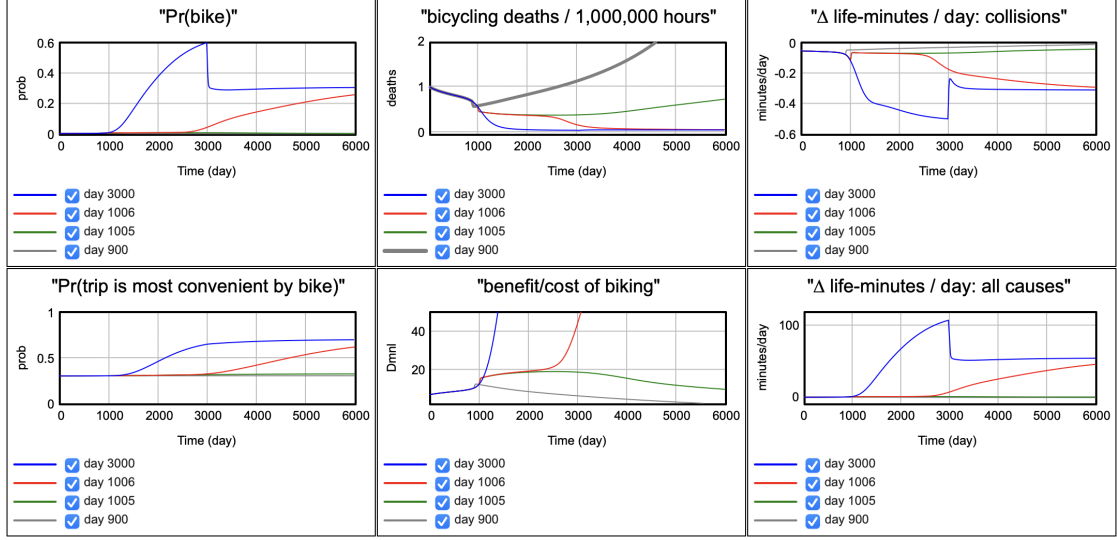


Figure 5: If a helmet law is introduced after a robust biking culture is established, the new law will damage public health, but the damage may be limited. However, such a law can also drive the system into the car-centric attractor. Here, if the bikeshare system has had 1006 days to grow, then the helmet law (at 70% compliance) merely reduces the benefit and converges to the same equilibrium shown in Fig. 4, but if the law is introduced one day earlier, then cycling culture collapses. The split in trajectories is shown most clearly in “benefit/cost of biking”.

of cyclists. Even the risk per hour spikes before falling to new lows (if $\beta < 1$) as the safety-in-numbers effect catches up.

As the increase in collisions poses a political risk, Fig. 6 suggests a possible policy intervention. Collisions can spike if ridership—which in this model instantly tracks helmet law compliance—increases faster than the safety-in-numbers effect can keep pace with. But if law compliance changes more gradually (shown from 0.1/day to 0.003/day; the safety-in-numbers effect’s change rate is 0.01/day), then the spike in collisions is reduced or even eliminated.⁵ Hence the possibility that political risk could be minimised by e.g. gradually reducing bareheaded-riding fines before eliminating them entirely, or quietly ending enforcement.⁶ The health benefits, which closely follow ridership numbers, also accrue more slowly, but the question of how to balance slower convergence to maximal health benefits vs. lessened risk of political backlash during the worse phase of the worse-before-better dynamic is beyond the scope of this work.

⁵The risk profiles of riders who most quickly choose to return to cycling after a helmet law’s repeal may be a confound, but is not addressed here.

⁶The optimal rate is probably not easy to determine from published results, since the rate of change of the safety-in-numbers effect is not well studied, and involves behaviours on several timescales.

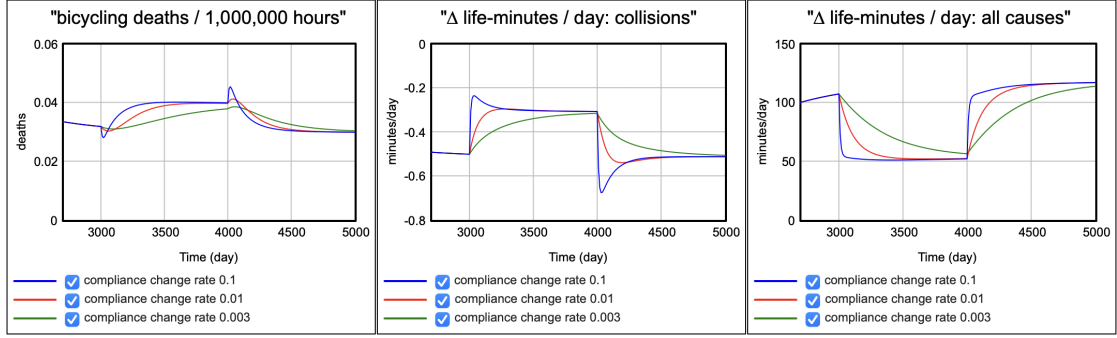


Figure 6: The trajectory of Fig. 4, with a helmet law introduced on day 3000 (70% compliance) and repealed on day 4000. The different lines show the effect of different rates of behavioural adjustment to the legal changes. The rate of change of the safety-in-numbers effect is fixed at 0.01/day.

4.4 General observations anent sensitivity

Near the boundary between attractors, the outcome is highly sensitive to many of the model’s parameters. The ones that flip the system vary somewhat according to where in the parameter space the system starts, but some trends may be observed. Moving further from the boundary, some parameters change the eventual equilibrium Δ lifespan/day, and some change only the rate of convergence to that equilibrium. Here are a few general observations (parameter names given for comparison with the figure, or with the model):

Helmet law compliance: Increasing helmet law enforcement decreases ridership, especially with a bikeshare system. This affects life expectancy far more dramatically than documented in previously published static analyses. The time constants for this change include safety-in-numbers adjustments, safety perceptions, investment in infrastructure, and bikeshare capacity adjustment.

Perceptions of safety: If people feel safe biking, the linear increase in $\text{Pr}(\text{bike})$ activates the infrastructure \rightarrow convenience \rightarrow ridership \rightarrow safety feedback.

Convenience: Increasing the upper limit on the number of trips that are most convenient by bike is beneficial in this simple model, and it would be more powerful if individual cyclist demographics were separated or measures such as social equity or child mobility were examined.

Infrastructure: Quickly build and rigorously maintain infrastructure. The long initial period during which growth is almost imperceptible is due largely to the slow response time of infrastructure, and can thus be greatly accelerated by a preemptive infrastructure project that immediately increases convenience—and, not modelled but true in the real world, the perception of safety.

Convenience of joining bikeshare: Make bikeshare systems easy to join, and membership inexpensive to keep.

Transport hours: Amusingly, increasing the hours of transport per day usually increases health. Only when most people use cars, pollution is high, and collisions are frequent is this effect reversed. This result relies on the model’s assumption

that increasing transportation hours would not affect mode choice, and at very high levels, the linearised exercise–health dose–response, and ignores the immediate opportunity costs of transportation time.

Bikeshare bikes/station: In the model, this parameter affects access: 10 bikes at 2 5-bike stations gives twice as many people access as 10 bikes at a single station. In the real world this is complicated by unmet demand, limited placement opportunities, increased difficulty of rebalancing, users learning how often an operable bike will be at the closest station. . .

Target trips/(bike·day): The fewer trips per bike per day required to make the system financially viable, the faster the system can expand—assuming that profits are reinvested.

People/km²: Higher-density cities increase the number of people near any given station. Not modelled: higher-density cities put more destinations within easy reach of bikes, generate more political pressure to address difficulties with car-first systems (which can push towards making them bikeable, more pressure for EVs of various sizes, turning bike infrastructure into car infrastructure. . .), or can even put most destinations close enough that biking is less appealing than walking.

safety-in-numbers exponent: Varying β (§2.2.1) by 10%, as Vensim’s Sensitivity2All does, is misleading, since it is an exponent, and since the dynamic response of the model to variations in β is markedly nonlinear across its range. That said, β can have a profound impact on the safety of cyclists, and thus on the evolving dynamics of bicycle infrastructure and demographics. Future work will investigate what factors are responsible for the large spread in values found by [Elvik and Goel \[2019\]](#), and search for policies that might lower β on different timescales.

Especially early, when the system is sensitive to perturbations in either direction, making large changes to as many parameters as possible will activate feedbacks that make convergence to the chosen equilibrium more likely.

5 Discussion

This simple model aggregates or ignores many subsystems—for example, different kinds of infrastructure (convenience, safety, pleasantness. . .) for various trip types (commuting, errands, children’s mobility needs, socialisation, leisure. . .), modes (car, bike, rail, scooter. . .), and interventions that operate on different spatial and temporal scales (driver education, policing, bike storage, separated lanes, superblocks, zoning, and other incentives for different modes. . .). We have attempted to capture the essence of the behaviour without creating too many degrees of freedom, but even so, many parameters are just educated guesses. Additional complexity may offer additional insights at the cost of more guesswork, and a combinatorial explosion in parameter space.

Here, the competitive advantage of bicycling was represented only by convenience infrastructure. A more detailed model of competitive advantage may offer insight into nudges *away* from driving, such as parking restrictions, congestion charges, rerouting of through-traffic, etc.

The choice between driving and biking was made through a pared-down model of cyclist convenience and safety, comparing only those two modes. The metric of interest—life expectancy—was only modulated by exercise, collisions, and air pollution. Important future work would expand the pool of transportation users to include those who cannot drive—children, economically disadvantaged, those to whom car parking is not available; and those who cannot bike—especially the large subgroup who are so out of shape that they can only use active modes for very short distances at first, before regaining basic function.

The case of children is especially interesting, since not only do independently mobile children reduce the burden of parenting, but the ability to independently explore a city seems likely to facilitate processes by which children turn into competent adults [Bruntlett and Bruntlett, 2021; Silonsaari et al., 2024]. A long-term consequence of weakness in this system has been called the “backseat generation”—children and adolescents who have only experienced mobility from the back seat of a car, and thus have been denied an opportunity for several kinds of cognitive development.

Data are available for the implementation of various bikeshare systems under various infrastructure-development and legal frameworks. Given the number of parameters that can be constrained by the research, it may be possible to fit this model to data and begin to make quantitative predictions.

5.1 Stability

This paper examines a bistable system initialised to an unstable equilibrium, so any intervention is interesting. Some of the delays are large: people change habits slowly, in most countries the convenience of cars has been the primary goal of transportation planners for decades resulting in a system requiring extensive modification for some of the more important factors that encourage bicycling, and bikeshare systems and the supporting infrastructure—and mindshare—take many years to permeate a city. Given these long timescales, even an unstable system may appear stable.

However, a few balancing feedback loops must exist. These hypotheses will be explored in future work:

Car traffic flow rates: Traffic congestion arises when the demand for road exceeds supply, and since each car creates far more demand than each bike, the system supports many fewer trips by car. As people turn from cars to bikes for more trips, less demand on road systems results in more efficient traffic flows, reducing the traffic cost and terminal cost of trips by car, thus increasing their appeal. On the other hand, improving travel times by car increases the number of trips by car even in the absence of alternatives, through induced demand [Lee et al., 1999]. Since car traffic delays are highly nonlinear in car traffic volumes, these loops were omitted for simplicity.

Bicycle theft: A supply of bicycles supports an ecosystem of thieves, which disincentivises cycling, although bikeshares are less susceptible than bike ownership [Pucher and Buehler, 2008; Handy et al., 2010; Kabra et al., 2020].

Bike safety perception spread through media: An interesting possibility explored by [Macmillan et al. \[2016\]](#) is that media preferentially report cyclist killings. Since more cycling usually ($\beta > 0$) results in more killings, to the extent that safety perceptions come from media reports, the appeal of cycling will be self-limiting.

Bike safety perception spread through social networks: Early stages of bicycle adoption are frequently facilitated by social interactions. Social-graph structures in which growth connects formerly disconnected components could allow the number of people who hear news of perceived risks to grow faster than the growth of the community. Could this increase the perception of risk fast enough to limit growth?

Change always involves loss. Moving a system towards active transportation tends to be strongly resisted by those who have, through disuse, lost the confidence or ability to do even mild physical activity. In this model, this can be somewhat explored by lowering the probability of joining a bikeshare or buying a bike despite logical reasons to do so, and by reducing infrastructure responsiveness. Each of these affects rates of change throughout the system. When these rates are close to rates of decline (e.g. infrastructure decay), the system’s asymptotic behaviour becomes sensitive to initial conditions. A more grounded study of these effects could guide acceptable interventions.

5.2 Social pressure to wear helmets?

As expected for a social-approval-seeking species such as ours, community pressure to wear a helmet may behave similarly to a law. This suggests an interesting possibility: that helmet publicity campaigns and social mores may reduce long-term safety. It is conceivable that such campaigns—which always implicitly and sometimes explicitly exaggerate the dangers of cycling—send a stronger signal than a law that bicycling is dangerous, at the same time stealing attention from the interventions that activate virtuous cycles [[Gerhard, 2023](#)]. Furthermore, social norms can broadcast the same message [[Ledesma et al., 2019](#)]. If this is the case, then even an individual’s choice to wear a helmet may trade a possible increase in safety today for increased risk in the years to come. Perhaps the best choice for an individual is to wear a helmet while discouraging others from doing so.

5.3 The big picture

The transition from car-based to active mobility is closely tied to other, larger processes, which touch on many of the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Although speculative, feedbacks with the broader social framework could potentially have dramatic and far-reaching effects:

- Childhood autonomous mobility not only reduces parental burden, but is important for both physical and cognitive development, e.g. spatial reasoning, executive control, independence, socialisation, gumption, happiness, etc [[Carstensen et al., 2014](#); [Bruntlett and Bruntlett, 2021](#); [Silonsaari et al., 2024](#)].
- We speculate that both presentation of self and recognition of other road users as non-threatening humans rather than as potentially lethal machines [[Hennessy and](#)

Wiesenthal, 1999; Ellison-Potter et al., 2001] may reduce exposure to fight-or-flight stresses, further reducing burden of disease and improving individual and social health.

- Availability of effective transportation at low cost reduces barriers to mobility, economic hardship, and inequality, thus potentially improving many measures of individual and societal wellbeing [Wilkinson et al., 2019].
- While reduction and avoidance of CO₂ emissions is *sine qua non* for humanity, the spatial and temporal health consequences of carbon pollution mitigation are too great, and too timing-dependent, to be easily mapped onto changes in life expectancy. What is certain is that transitioning away from fossil fuels and intensive manufacturing and mining, towards mobility systems that can be rapidly scaled to serve billions, is urgent. Thus, the ratio of mobility and health benefits to societal and environmental costs of bicycle-centric transportation systems, especially given the simplicity and maturity of the technology and expected worldwide urbanisation trends, deserves our attention.

5.4 Conclusion

The safety-in-numbers effect is strongly correlated with the risk of bicycle riding. The arguments and evidence pointing to a cause-and-effect relationship—and probably multiple causal feedback loops on various timescales—are too great to ignore. Assuming more bicycling increases safety, we have sketched a model illustrating some potential dynamics of this effect. Initial efforts to increase ridership can activate reinforcing feedback loops, resulting in superlinear gains to life expectancy, healthspan, and wellbeing. In contrast, helmet laws do nothing to avert car-bike crashes, and cannot improve collision survival by more than a (small) constant factor. Thus, if they even slightly nudge people away from bicycling, the same system feedbacks erode safety far more severely than can be restored even by idealised helmets. In other words, static estimates of the public health effects of helmet laws are likely to dramatically underestimate the long-term harm done by unintended consequences. Given even the remote possibility of this, the potential size of the effects and the far-reaching societal consequences make it vital that bicycle helmet policies be examined with extreme care.

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