



## **Bike Equity: Can Alternative Transport Become the Great Equalizer?**

*Claire Cahen*

The urgency of climate change makes reconsidering and redesigning everyday urban life all the more critical. Cities across the U.S. are already drawing up plans to reduce our dependency on cars and promoting alternate modes of transportation like bicycling.

Yet, if we are not careful, promoting bicycling infrastructure—from bike lanes to bike paths to bike shares—may create new divides between those who have access to sustainable transportation and those who do not.

Through my work, I draw out the issues of equal access and public health that we should take into account to ensure that the transition toward sustainability does not leave out poorer neighborhoods and lower-income people.



*Figure 1.* Photo by João Pimentel Ferreira. Used under CC 4.0.

Over the past decade, bicycling has enjoyed a tremendous rise in popularity as a mode of transportation to and from work and school. Cities across the U.S. have begun to think more seriously about how to

"Enough evidence has accumulated to make it difficult to refute the need to redesign U.S. cities to become more walkable and bikeable. Yet, the question is whether the familiar white stripes of bike lanes will continue to serve as markers of wealth, serving only a few."

develop infrastructure that supports safe and low-stress bicycling as a mode of commuting, expanding bike lanes and bike paths, and creating new bike-share programs. These new

developments are often talked about as positive changes, helping us transition to more sustainable and active cities.

### **Highlights**

**Most bicycle commuters in the U.S. do so out of economic necessity.**

**New bicycle infrastructure is closely related to gentrification, leaving behind low-income riders who often have the most dangerous commutes.**

**We must carefully consider urban sustainability measures and account for who most uses sustainable transportation.**

However, there are also social justice issues around equality and access at stake in the rise of this bicycling tide. Indeed, the majority of bicycle commuters in the U.S. are lower income and ride their bikes not out of choice, but out of necessity. Bicycling is one of the cheapest forms of transportation. Yet, lower-income bike commuters are the least likely to have access to bicycling infrastructure and often have the most dangerous commutes. The research in this article brings these issues of unequal access to light, focusing on their consequences for individual and neighborhood health.

## **Methods**

The data for this research was gathered through two primary means. First, we interviewed advocates of bicycling. Second, we observed meetings and conferences for bicycling advocates, as well as neighborhood meetings in which community members and politicians discussed how to make parts of Los Angeles more livable and walkable.

## **Results**

- Bicycling infrastructure is, in many lower-income communities, a sign of gentrification.
- The commutes of those who bike out of necessity are made less safe by unclear bicycling laws and discriminatory police enforcement of these laws. Ticketing, fining, arrests, and confiscations of bicycles are everyday risks for bike commuters.
- Lack of safe bicycling and pedestrian infrastructure is a primary concern not just for adults who use these modes of transportation to work, but for children who have dangerous commutes to school.

## ***HOW DID A COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY PERSPECTIVE INFORM YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUES, RESULTS, AND IMPLICATIONS?***

Using a community psychology perspective helped me draw out the ways in which access to bicycling is linked with issues of broader social justice and public health. I was able to consider the multiple implications of my work not just for individual cyclists, but also for neighborhoods and cities, and think through how solutions could be implemented at the level of policy, as well as at the grassroots level, through community engagement and participation.

## What Does This Mean For?

*Research and Evaluation*—Evaluation of programs promoting active transportation should take into account whether new pedestrian and bicycling infrastructure is improving neighborhood access and livability for all residents. It should also account for the important issues of unequal policing of cyclists and unclear bicycling laws, which are making bicycle use less safe for those who most depend on their bicycles as a mode of commuting.

*Public Policy*—We must advocate for measures that both protect affordable housing and promote neighborhoods that are less car dependent and more livable. We should remain watchful of equal access to bicycling infrastructure and to the dangers of bicycling when infrastructure is inadequate or poorly implemented. These findings are important for urban planners and policy-makers who must consider equal access and neighborhood division in their consideration of sustainability initiatives.

### For more information:

Cahen, C. (2016). "More Than Paint on Concrete": The Winding Path toward Bike Equity. *Global Journal of Community Psychology Practice*, 7(3), 1-9.

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