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Examining Bike Helmet Mandates

A helmet requirement for people cycling has been floated by Westchester County Legislator Damon Maher. The proposal means well. Helmets mitigate some head injuries. Paradoxically, though, mandating helmets ends up being a net negative.



A Very Small Problem

Traumatic brain injuries account for just 2% of emergency department visits. The top three causes, accounting for 78% of those visits, are falls, being struck by/against an object, and motor vehicle crashes. Cycling isn't among them. Similarly, 75% of injuries received while riding are to body parts other than the head.

Negative Public Health Outcome

- Few people are injured or die from head injuries while cycling
- Many people suffer serious health consequences from inactivity
- Mandating helmets discourages cycling because
 - it signals that riding is dangerous
 - it complicates spur of the moment decisions to ride
 - some people don't have access to helmets, due to cost or time
- The perceived protection of helmets encourages riders to engage in riskier behaviors
- Similarly, people driving are less cautious around people cycling who have helmets on

The result is worse public health overall.

Negative Social Justice Outcome

First, folks need to know there is a law requiring helmets. Few people know their local ordinances, and many people ride into the County from other places.

Then, obtaining a helmet costs money and time. Too many folks are running short on one, or both.

Black and brown people receive disproportionate attention from law enforcement. Is creating another pretext for unnecessary police interactions the right thing to do?

Cycling for transportation is done most by low income households. That is in large part because cars cost \$9,300 per year. Encouraging active transportation helps people out of poverty by providing access to opportunities. Is it appropriate to add barriers to social mobility?

Helmet advocates suggest a campaign to give away helmets for free. It would have to be a massive effort to reach the whole county. A distribution program would have to be ongoing, as kids grow, new people move in, and existing residents decide to begin cycling. All to produce a tiny change in head injuries. Could this huge endeavor even succeed, given our inability to get everyone to simply participate in the Census?

Helmet Efficacy

A key manager at Giro Helmet recently said “There are many misconceptions about helmets. We do not design helmets specifically to reduce chances or severity of injury when impacts involve a car.”



Broader Safety Solutions

All of the time and money needed for helmet requirements and give aways would be better invested in addressing the underlying danger. Motor vehicles are the number 2 cause of injury death and number 4 reason for non-fatal emergency room visits. Proven strategies to significantly cut these casualties are: Vision Zero traffic engineering, sidewalks, protected bike lanes and speed cameras.