



WOMEN CYCLING PROJECT



**WHAT REACTION DO YOU GET WHEN CYCLING FOR
TRANSPORTATION?**



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BY ANDREA GARLAND



"When I bike with my trailer (and my kids inside), I get a lot more respect from motorists." (40's, Greensboro, North Carolina)

Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals

Background

Why do fewer women than men use their bikes to get around in the United States (U.S.)? This was the question that the Association of Pedestrian and Bicycling Professionals (APBP) asked when they launched the Women Cycling Project in spring of 2010. APBP wanted to open a national dialogue about why the rate of women using their bikes for transportation in the U.S. is less than half that of men and what could be done to get more women of all ages riding in their community.

The idea for the project arose from discussions about the findings and recommendations of a group of U.S. experts who went to Europe the previous year to look at everyday bicycling over there. Kit Keller, Executive Director of APBP and member of the group said: "After seeing so many women cycling in

Copenhagen on the 2009 International Scan on Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety and Mobility¹, I began to wonder why we don't see more women cycling in cities in North America". APBP member Fionnuala Quinn made that question come alive through her volunteer work with APBP on the survey and free webinar." The APBP Women's Cycling Project team wanted to use the voices of women to suggest fresh ideas for policy makers, engineers, planners, public health and other professionals. As a first step, APBP conducted an on-line survey directed at U.S. women that asked lots of questions about bicycling. APBP quickly heard from over 13,000 women not only in the U.S., but also in many countries from all around the world. The APBP team wanted to hear from women and it turned out that they

wanted to tell us all about bicycling and their experiences and thoughts.

As well as asking specific questions about behaviors, the team asked for personal opinions about a whole range of bicycling issues. Thousands of separate comments were received from women of all ages expressing views about the joy of cycling as well as insights into their concerns. Three articles were prepared to look in more depth at some of the open-ended questions. In this article we will look at the responses received to the following question asked.

QUESTION
What reaction do you get when cycling for transportation?

¹ Federal Highway Administration (FHWA), American Association of State Highway Transportation Officials (AASHTO), National Cooperative Highway Research Program (NCHRP) International Scan on Bicycle and Pedestrian Safety and Mobility

Table 1: What reactions do you get when cycling for transportation?

Open-Ended Response Categories	Drivers	Cyclists	Strangers	Coworkers	Family & Friends	Riding with Kids	100%
Positive	5%	1%	7%	1%	1%	1%	16%
Mixed	6%	-	9%	1%	-	-	16%
Bewildered	12%	1%	2%	-	-	-	15%
Negative	18%	1%	4%	-	-	-	23%
Male Attention	2%	-	6%	-	-	-	8%
Curiosity	1%	-	7%	-	1%	1%	10%
Safety Concerns	-	-	1%	1%	1%	-	3%
No Reaction	3%	-	-	-	-	-	3%
Other	6%	-	-	-	-	-	6%

WHAT REACTIONS DO YOU GET WHEN CYCLING FOR TRANSPORTATION? (918 RESPONSES)

Many women who cycle have learned that their choice sometimes evokes both positive and negative reactions from motorists they encounter as well as from family, friends and coworkers. To get a female perspective on this issue, we asked women about what reactions they get when cycling for transportation. We provided an opportunity for an open-ended response to this question and 918 women responded. Comments ranged the entire spectrum from positive to negative. We sorted the answers into categories by percentage as shown on Table 1.

Positive Reactions

Sixteen percent of the women reported positive reactions from drivers when they ride. They commented that drivers seem to react respectfully because they are female or because they are riding with children. Some of the more experienced riders said that they believe that over the years drivers have improved at sharing the road with cyclists. Others are cheered on by coworkers who tell them that they consider them an inspiration.

*“One coworker told me I inspire her!”
(20+, Minneapolis, MN)*

*“Because I bike like I belong, and have a large trailer with toys on it, people generally appreciate me.”
(40’s Somerville, MA)*

Others pointed out that some people are just curious about why one would ride a bike on a regular basis. Ten percent of the women told us they often get questioned about their cycling habits and abilities by strangers and coworkers.

“I am usually oblivious to reactions unless someone is very loud or honks, mainly I am just focused on getting where I need to get safely to look for reactions. Overall, cycling is becoming so much more popular and therefore visible in Washington that I feel motorists are more aware than they used to be. The cycling advocacy group in our town has done a terrific job.” (30’s - Washington, DC)



“Surprise--I’m 65” (Chicago, IL)

“I feel like drivers give a bit more room because of my ponytail.” (20’s, Atlanta, Georgia)

“Occasional recognition in town: “I see you biking a lot” (and I do not know these people!)” (40’s Prescott, Arizona)

“People at work are amazed and fascinated. I am considered eccentric, but acceptable.” (30’s - Ann Arbor, Michigan)



"I bike with a small child, so most drivers very accommodating." (30's, Calgary, Canada)

Mixed Reactions

Women experienced a mix of reactions from strangers, drivers and co-workers who either act impressed or critical of the choice of cycling as transportation. Reactions may vary depending on the time of the day: for example, women suggested that drivers tend to be more aggressive during rush hour traffic and friendlier or ambivalent at other times. Also, some observed that attitudes may depend on the season and the weather: co-workers seem to be more impressed when women ride their bike to work in the winter. Other women felt stereotyped by strangers making assumptions about their socioeconomic background or reasons for biking.



"People always want to talk! People constantly say hello and strike up conversation at intersections, often in relation to my bike." (20's, Berkeley, CA)



"Lots of people assume it's harder than it is. Many people ask, 'Do you ride in the rain.' I answer, 'Yes. Do you drive when it's sunny?'" (40's Arcata, California)

Bewildered Reactions

Fifteen percent of the women who commented on this question thought that drivers who reacted to their cycling are more inclined to be those who had not been paying attention due to cell phones or some other distraction. Reactions also come from those who don't know how to share the road with bikes or from people not expecting to see a bicyclist. Furthermore, some women also complained about inattentive cyclists who ride on the wrong side of the road or who pass recklessly. In some cases, pedestrians who are not paying attention when crossing the street react upon encountering cyclists.

"Women speak"

From St Paul, Minnesota - Age 30+

"There is a wide variation in reaction. I have commuted by bike seasonally the past 6 years to work and the reaction has really varied. A lot of my coworkers are impressed, I think most motorists are ambivalent, but I have had the occasional harassing comments and felt threatened on the road by some motorists. Those are few and far between, but I do admit, they really color one's experience."

From Brooklyn, New York - Age 20+

"I would define it as blatant disregard, but the fact that I am a woman only effects the situation when I tell the driver to slow down - The disparaging remarks that follow always have to do with my gender."

From Blacksburg, Virginia - Age 30+

"People assume I'm poor (or financially deficient) which couldn't be farther from the truth."

From Arlington, MA - Age 40+

"Cell phones have definitely worsened conditions recently. Also, definitely get treated better when wearing street/gym clothes than when wearing lycra (this is even more pronounced for my husband though)"

From Missoula, Montana - Age 40+

"Some motorists stop when they don't have a stop sign and I do, which is nice when I've been waiting a long time to cross a busy road, but also potentially dangerous - it may cause a rear-end collision"



"I've had the wicked witch theme sung at me several times :-)" (50's - Arlington, MA)

“Women speak”

From Dublin, Ohio - Age 50+

“I recently encountered a crazy jogger who harassed me about my lights being too bright.”

From San Francisco, CA - Age 20+

“In general, pedestrians are annoyed if I am on a shared public promenade, motorists are annoyed I am in their way.”

From Portland, Oregon - Age 30+

“When biking with my girls I get harassed. I've been called a bad mom by an angry car driver.”

From Mill Valley, CA - Age 40+

“If I ride with my child I sense negativity when we take the road. Honking, finger shaking, heads nodding back and forth, rolling down the window to make negative comments about me being negligent.”

From Falmouth, MA - Age 30+

“Sometimes coworkers yell at me for being crazy (especially during bad weather or now that I'm pregnant)”

From Chicago, Illinois - Age 30+

“Harassment is mostly in the form of unwanted attention from men.”

From Hartford, Connecticut

“I'm told how brave I am, which is kind of condescending. I also get comments on biking with heels.”

From Virginia Beach, VA - Age 30+

“Men pull over in their cars and ask me if I want a ride.” (30's - Virginia Beach, Virginia)

From Silver Spring, MD - Age 50+

“A dead animal gets better treatment.”

From Missoula, Montana- Age 30+

“I am typically too fast for them to notice. Most of the time folks pay no mind. I live in a very bike friendly community. A lot of people bike.”

From Los Angeles, CA - Age 20+

“People ask concerned questions about my safety, implying that they think I'm about to be killed.”

From Austin, TX - Age 30+

“Smiles-I look great on my bike.”



“It's very mixed. There's the good (observant and courteous), the bad (unobservant), and the ugly (observant but discourteous/reckless). Most motorists are decent in my opinion.” (Twenty-something from Austin, TX)

Negative Reactions

About 18 percent of the women wrote about the negative reactions they encounter when cycling. They stated that the roadway can feel unwelcome because of the small minority of motorists who treat cyclists as obstacles, instead of as legitimate road users.

Some strangers make negative comments when they encounter a cyclist on 'their' path. Other women reported being told by coworkers that they must be 'crazy' that they cycle. Likewise, some women reported being rebuked by strangers because they are riding with children.

“Some vehicles try to get very close to my pedals almost try to run me off the road. Lots of big semi's are dangerously close. Some cars (older folks) won't move over on smaller roads with little or no traffic (won't cross the double yellow line to allow more room around a biker).” (Woman in her 50's- Anchorage, Alaska)

Other Reactions

Another eight percent of the respondents reported that the reactions they get when cycling are directly related to their gender. They receive compliments about their looks, fashion choices or their cute bikes but they are also subject to unwelcome male attention including inappropriate comments or catcalls.

Only about three percent said that their family, friends and peers make comments about their safety. The remaining respondents indicate that they get no reaction at all to their cycling. They said that they themselves are either too focused on riding to notice anything or else that they live in a community that is already well used to cyclists.

“Depending on what I wear when I cycle, I get more or less comments - people can't get over seeing a woman cycling in a skirt & heels” (30's - Vancouver, Canada)

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Disclosure:

The quotes included in this report were selected out of the responses from the open-ended answers to the survey. They are not associated with the people shown in any of the pictures used in this report.

Conclusion

From the over 900 comments we learned that women experience reactions over a wide range and in different forms when riding. Many women reported being cheered and complimented when riding their bikes. They find themselves being admired by friends and peers, some of whom seem to believe riding a bike is some sort of heroic endeavor. For women who ride with their children, they can experience anything from admiration and respect to scolding for being irresponsible. Family and friends are more usually the ones who express concern about the women's safety. Negative reactions can be in the form of criticism from coworkers and harassment from unwelcome male attention all the way to motorists throwing things at riders.

Only a small minority of women reported living in communities where a woman riding a bike is so unremarkable that nobody has anything to say about it. Women on bikes do seem to generate comments and attention, whether positive or negative. We can aspire for a day when a woman riding a bike in her community would be as unremarkable as a person drinking a cup of coffee. In the meantime, we could settle for more of the supportive-type comments and reactions.

The Women Cycling Project group is a project of the Association of Pedestrian and Bicycle Professionals (APBP). APBP is a unique national and international association that brings together the knowledge and expertise of professionals in the discipline of pedestrian and bicycle transportation. APBP members are planners, engineers, architects, landscape architects, transportation researchers, suppliers, advocates, Safe Routes to School, trails and public health professionals. APBP members work at all levels of government, in consulting firms and with non-profit organizations. APBP offers resources and training for building sustainable transportation.

To find out more about this project, view resources and learn how to get connected with others interested in the topic of women bicycling, visit the APBP website at www.apbp.org.



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Expertise for sustainable
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