



Fear: A Silent Barrier to Bicycling in Black and Hispanic Communities

BY CHARLES BROWN, MPA

Should transportation professionals be more concerned about the personal safety of cyclists in Black and Hispanic Communities? At the Alan M. Voorhees Transportation Center (VTC), the fear of being robbed and assaulted while bicycling ranked as the number two barrier to bicycling, second only to the fear of a traffic collision in our most recent study of bicycle access and usage among Blacks and Hispanics in thirty-four neighborhoods throughout New Jersey (see Table 1).

While the fear of a traffic collision does not come as a surprise—New Jersey cycling deaths are on a rise and the state has been designated a Pedestrian-Bicycle Focus State by the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA)—Blacks and Hispanics’ collective fear of being robbed or assaulted while cycling is an eye-opener, a lightning bolt of revelation.¹ Considering the perceived difficulty in robbing and assaulting a cyclist, as opposed to a pedestrian who is moving at a much slower pace, this timely revelation has more to do with the overall ranking than the known fact that many Blacks and Hispanics reside in locations with disproportionate amounts of crime.

With only a few exceptions, the overall majority of the Blacks and Hispanics that responded to our intercept surveys reside in the six “Major Urban” centers and the “Urban 15” municipalities in New Jersey, as classified by the New Jersey State Police. During the period of 2005–2014, these major urban centers accounted for 39 percent of all violent crime. Similarly, the majority of all murders occurred in the Urban 15 municipalities, along with 27 percent of all purse snatching, 69 percent of highway robberies, and 11 percent of bicycle theft.²

Since “crime prevention is everybody’s business,” the personal safety of Blacks and Hispanics cyclists can no longer be ignored or dismissed by transportation professionals as simply a police issue.³ Transportation professionals must be more concerned about the personal safety of bicyclists in Black and Hispanic communities, and here is why.

Transportation professionals are responsible for the mobility and safety needs of all road users. As evident on the ITE website, “The Institute of Transportation Engineers serves as an international educational and scientific association of transportation professionals who are responsible for meeting mobility and safety needs.” Historically, however, it can be argued that when it comes to the needs of all road users, transportation professionals have prioritized the mobility and safety needs of vehicles over the needs

of bicyclists and pedestrians during an era in which vehicles have dominated roadways. There can be reluctance by municipal and county engineers to embrace and support complete streets policy adoption and implementation, even though doing so would be the first step towards mobility and safety for all road users, especially in traditionally-underserved communities.

Crash statistics fragment the reality and duality of safety. Too often design preferences and solutions are traffic safety-rich and personal safety-bankrupt. This is due, in part, to transportation professionals’ reliance on crash statistics to ascertain the safety of a particular roadway or corridor. The issue with this often-used sole approach is that absent of crime statistics, transportation professionals are fragmenting the reality and duality of safety; safety is best understood as being both traffic-related and personal. Decisions cannot be made in a bubble or outside the social context and realities of these communities. If only crash statistics are used to influence design and improvements, there may be a reduction in vehicle-cyclist crashes, but an increase in frustration among residents if the design leads them to the very parts of town that they seek to avoid. These residents are experts of their communities, and if their social realities are not taken more seriously during community engagement and public involvement activities, their personal safety concerns will remain ever-present and a dangerous reality for them and their families. Furthermore, the use of crash statistics absent of crime statistics leads to funding and policy decisions that only target safety from one angle.

Personal safety concerns are universally-silent yet culturally-known barriers to bicycling. Many transportation professionals have proposed creative design treatments and employed international and national best practices to increase bicycling in Black and Hispanic communities with varying degrees of success. Whereas many minorities use bicycles to go to work, school, parks,

Table 1: Ranking of variables that are barriers to bicycling for bicyclists and non-bicyclists in Black and Hispanic Communities.

Variables	All Respondents		Bicyclists		Non-Bicyclists	
	%	Ranking	%	Ranking	%	Ranking
Fear of traffic collision	31%	1	27%	1	34%	1
Fear of robbery/assault	16%	2	17%	2	15%	2
Fear of being profiled by the police	8%	5	9%	5	6%	5
Fear of verbal harassment	5%	7	5%	7	6%	5
Fear of being stranded with broken bicycle	11%	4	10%	4	11%	4
Cost of bicycle maintenance	6%	6	5%	7	6%	5
Pavement Condition	14%	3	14%	3	14%	3
Pregnancy/small children	5%	7	4%	8	5%	6
Other	5%	7	8%	6	3%	7
Total	100%		100%		100%	

Source: Charles T. Brown, MPA, Voorhees Transportation Center



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Figure 1. African-American family enjoying the New Brunswick, NJ, USA Ciclovía (“Open Streets”).

visit friends and family, or run errands, few initiatives (e.g. Open Streets) or recommendations directly address this silent barrier to bicycling in Black and Hispanic communities (See Figure 1). This is unfortunate considering that an increase in bicycling would lead to safety in numbers, less congestion, and overall reductions in air pollution. Increases in bicycling in minority communities can also lead to social change and economic impacts—the latter of which is a necessity in Black and Hispanic communities.⁴

Transportation professionals should be more concerned about the personal safety of Black and Hispanic cyclists because they are in a position to change how the built environment either acts as a conduit or barrier to criminal activity; they are in a position to advocate for the use of crime statistics and crash statistics to ensure the best design solutions; and they have taken an oath to ensure the mobility and safety of all road users and that includes bicyclists. Here are a few ways in which transportation professionals can make this change:

- Receive training in crime prevention through environmental design;
- Prioritize crime statistics with crash statistics;
- Ask personal safety questions during public involvement meetings;
- Embrace complete streets policy adoption and implementation; and
- Seek diverse transportation staff.

One way ITE has been becoming involved in this issue is through participation in the National Active Transportation Diversity Task Force, which seeks to uplift equity through coalition building. The National Active Transportation Diversity Task Force is composed of a

broad array of experts and practitioners from around the country who engage in a national conversation and support outreach that elevates street scale from a local issue to a state and national issue. Organizations champion active transportation improvements to increase physical activity in underserved communities. Task Force members help identify and assist states and local communities with Safe Routes to School, promote Complete Streets, and secure new funding to support active transportation in the communities with the most need. [itej](#)

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