

Pedal Power ACT Position: Mandatory Helmet Law

Pedal Power ACT acknowledges that mandatory helmet laws (MHLs) have become an emotive topic in Australia, and within our organisation alone, our members have a range of conflicting positions on this topic.

Pedal Power ACT would like to assert that the ultimate goal of bicycle policy should be seen in the wider context of improving health and safety of the wider community, as well as improving the transportation system by promoting mode choice and a hierarchy of walking, cycling, public transport and then the personal automobile. A higher mode-share of bicycling for transportation and support of bicycle use for both recreation and sport are both critical to achieving those goals.

There is significant evidence that once riding a bike, a rider is better protected against serious injury whilst wearing a helmet when compared to not wearing a helmet. Conversely, a wide range of other factors influencing bicycle use mean that the evidence of whether mandatory helmet laws contribute to overall community health and safety is far from settled.

Australia and New Zealand are the only countries in the world with a universal requirement for all adults and children to wear helmets when riding bicycles. The only exceptions to that law are the Northern Territory allowing riders to forego a helmet on bicycle paths, and for passengers of certain types of multiple-passenger bicycles, such as pedicabs, to not require a helmet in some states.

Israel introduced MHL in 2007 and revised them in 2011 on the grounds that helmet laws were deterring many people from cycling. The revision removed the need for adults to wear a helmet when cycling on urban roads. Mexico introduced MHL in 2009 and repealed them in 2011 as part of a range of measures designed to increase cycling mode share from 2% to 5% in Mexico City. A number of jurisdictions around the world require helmets for children up to a particular age, with varying degrees of enforcement.

There are a number of arguments against mandatory helmet laws, although any reasonable argument against MHL must acknowledge the fact that once on a bike, riders are safer if they are wearing a bicycle helmet. These arguments are:

- A significant component of safety for bike riders comes from a strong culture of cycling, fostered by high quality infrastructure and wider spread of regular bicycle riders amongst the driving community.



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Cycling Advocacy

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Ride to Work

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Ride Safe to School Day

Cycle Facilities Rating

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Bicycle Maintenance



- MHL create a perception that riding a bicycle is not inherently safe, whereas promoting individual choice for helmet wearing creates a risk-based mindset where individuals choose to wear a helmet when the circumstances suit them.
- Repealing MHL would not prevent individual sporting organisations from requiring helmets to participate in particular events.
- In a multi-modal transport system, widespread bicycle use, and particularly bicycle sharing schemes are important in increasing mode choice, reducing reliance on the automobile and taking pressure off of public transport. The loss in flexibility created by MHL has led bicycle-share schemes to fail in every city with MHL that they have been trialled in. In cities without MHL, a large number of bicycle share schemes have been successful in completely changing the transportation mode-share in cities, reducing congestion, reducing the amount of street space required for parking, and increasing the utility provided by the streetscape.

A number of studies have examined the extent to which the introduction of MHL changed levels of bicycle participation in Australia after 1990-92. These studies should be seen in an environment with a wide range of influencing factors, such as the continual increase in personal automobile use in Australia until approximately 2004-07, a general decline in the number of children walking or cycling to school over many years, and a wide range of other factors. A number of scientific studies have cited cycling figures with or without reference to these trends to provide evidence that MHL positively or negatively impacted bicycle use and public health in Australia. Given the wide range of outcomes, these studies need to be treated with caution, and merely demonstrate that there is a considerable amount of uncertainty regarding the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of MHL.

Pedal Power ACT acknowledges the wide range of views on this topic, and the vast majority of its members will continue to adhere to the law whilst it stands in Australia, and make their own risk-based choices on whether to wear or not to wear a helmet whilst travelling in countries where MHL do not apply.

In the event that MHL were repealed, Pedal Power ACT would continue to encourage our members to wear helmets when riding, particularly for children, and would consider measures to maximise helmet use at Pedal Power-run events.



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Pedal Power ACT asserts that any decision on repealing mandatory helmet laws must be wide ranging, and take into account the following aspects:

- The importance of the bicycle as a major transportation mode, capable of reducing congestion and reducing pressure on public transport in areas where bicycle mode-share is high;
- The overarching importance of infrastructure and other policy measures to provide a safe riding environment;
- Safety for riders once they have made a conscious decision to ride a bike;
- The impact of MHL on the decision to ride a bike or to use an alternate form of transportation;
- The ability of individuals to self-elect to wear a helmet when the type of riding is higher-risk, such as racing or riding off-road;
- The ability of organisations to mandate use of bicycle helmets for participation in certain types of events (competition, off-road, large-scale events, etc);
- The reduced ability under MHL for bike-share programs to flourish and greatly improve transportation options whilst reducing public costs of providing transportation; and
- Options for continuing to mandate use of bicycle helmets for children, up to a certain age (certain overseas jurisdictions have set an age limit of between 12 and 17 years for mandatory helmets for children).



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