

Stalker 1

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I Used to Walk on the Sidewalk

I came to college with a pair of clean white shoes. Now, only six weeks in, they're covered in grass and mud stains. It's really no fault of my own that they've become so dirty, it's the fault of the cyclists who demand I jump out of the way as they speed by on the sidewalk. I'm always having to step off into the grass as my friends and I embark on our weekly trip to Target. Bike bells have become a signal of imminent disaster for my formerly clean white shoes. My heart drops every time I hear the ring of a bell and the familiar "on your left" or "on your right" come from behind me.

Since coming to DC, I've observed a culture where many cyclists are seemingly under the assumption that they're entitled to the sidewalk. I should preface this by saying that I don't bike regularly. From my perspective as a non-cyclist, the sidewalk is used for walking, after all, it's in the name side-WALK. I've never thought of the sidewalk as a feasible place to bike. Living in Western North Carolina I've noticed that our predominantly rural roads are populated by numerous cyclists with no sidewalk to ride on. With that, drivers typically are extra cautious when in the presence of a cyclist. However, there doesn't seem to be this same cautious mentality from DC drivers, at least not in the eyes of the city's roughly seventeen thousand cyclists and counting (Lazo). This difference in driver behavior, maybe more so the fact that I hadn't recognized this discrepancy, led to my initial assumption that the streets were safe for cyclists.

When starting my research, I assumed the argument for using the sidewalk would boil down to how much more efficient biking is than walking. It seemed to me that cycling on the streets was generally safer for everyone involved, including pedestrians and cyclists. Weaving between people and dodging trash cans and telephone poles on the city's increasingly crowded sidewalks sounded significantly more dangerous than simply moving with the flow of traffic. However, as I previously mentioned, my own experiences warped my view.

In an effort to ground my perspective, I sought out statistics on accidents between bikes and pedestrians. Assuming I was going to be validated in my opinion that cyclists pose a threat to pedestrians, I was shocked when I found concrete data. Instead of backing up my admittedly uneducated position, I learned just how much of a benign threat to pedestrians bikes are.

According to the District Department of Transportation, between 2012 and 2018 there was an average of 1 bike vs pedestrian crash every 56 days, 6-7 per year on average. Only seven of these incidents between 2012 and 2018 resulted in major injuries. In comparison to this, there have been roughly 3,500 incidents between cars and pedestrians, averaging 1-2 per day in the same timeframe. (Beaujon) It's clear that the perceived threat bikes pose when on the sidewalk is nominal. Given this, it'd be hard to argue that pedestrian safety is put in peril by cyclists, the only potential casualty might be a few seconds out of someone's day.

This realization that I was, at least partially, in the wrong still hadn't completely convinced me, however. In a street interview with a passing cyclist, my contemptuous view of cyclists was reinvigorated. Mark, whose last name wasn't given, confessed he never thought much of his safety or the safety of others, instead, he prioritized his needs over his fellow sidewalk inhabitants. "I've never thought of the sidewalks as safer, even though they probably are, I'm on the sidewalk because I don't have to wait with traffic to take a right at this

intersection up here” (Mark). In an effort to shorten his daily commute, Mark typically opts for the sidewalk, dodging the numerous traffic lights that line his daily route. His poor reasoning behind riding on the sidewalk did nothing to convince me that cyclists belong there. Speaking to him led to me creating a caricature of cyclists as self-absorbed individuals ignorant of others on the sidewalk. His justification seemed to me to be selfish and only further cemented my animus towards cyclists. Inside I felt: *they didn't own the sidewalk, but they sure think they do.*

Despite Mark's less than convincing argument for riding on the sidewalk, I continued to explore the issue, shifting my focus towards the aspect of safety. My initial dismissal of safety as a contributing factor ceased when I came across a Washington Post article that dug into the core of my research question. Asking avid cyclists why they use the sidewalk, The Post's John Kelly uncovered the fact that many view DC's streets as uninhabitable for cyclists who value their safety. ““The reason that cyclists use the sidewalks is that they don't want to die,” wrote the District's John Glad. ‘If and when they are provided with dedicated bike lanes that are not accessible to drivers, they will be only too happy to use them’” (Kelly). With this article, the direction of my research took a sharp turn. I started to see Mark and his self-centered perspective as a deviation from the perspective of most cyclists. Additionally, I began to realize that not only is safety the primary motivation behind biking on the sidewalk, the level of comfort cyclists felt in the environment they bike in also factors into this decision. Given this, it became self-evident why many opt for the sidewalk: they're far less likely to be hit by a car on the sidewalk as opposed to when riding on the street.

Corroborating this notion that comfort decides where a cyclist rides, a 2015 survey asked DC cyclists to rate the level of perceived safety associated with a variety of street infrastructure on a scale out of 6. Streets with no bike lane, like many in the district, were given a rating of 2.9

(McNeil). The general lack of confidence in safety among many of the district's cyclists is put on full display with this survey. I'd assert anything under three is a pretty dismal rating, especially when put into the context of road infrastructure and the impact that safety infrastructure has on peoples' lives.

Delving deeper into the lack of safety, I stumbled upon a Washington Post headline that would cement my sudden change of heart. *Bicyclist Killed In Crash Tweeted Just Hours Earlier About The Danger Of Riding In D.C.* Skimming through the article, I was introduced to Jim Pagles, a Ph.D. student and major proponent of cycling who was, “well aware of the dangers of cycling . . . but he loved biking, and he wanted everyone to bike. He wanted everyone to feel like this was the best way to get around D.C.” (Lazo). The fact that something Pagles was so passionate about led to his untimely death had a firm effect on the way I view cyclists using the sidewalk. At this moment I thought to myself, *wow, I'm a real asshole*. I had turned a blind eye to the idea that the street presents because I was so concerned about being inconvenienced for a split second. But does one, undoubtedly tragic death justify the vast majority of cyclists using the sidewalk? In short, it does, because Pagles' case isn't an isolated one. Between March and August 2019 alone there were 404 bicycle accidents, a sharp increase from the yearly average of 334 between 2005 and 2010 (Regan). Although it may not be plainly visible, DC's streets seem to be bursting at the seams as the districts' population and population of cyclists both continue to balloon.

Pagles' death spurred my interest in cyclist safety. I've come to realize safety, and the perception of safety, are the main factors motivating many to opt for the sidewalk. In the last tweet he posted, Pagles sheds light on the challenges of biking in DC, “Had to bike through a roundabout over a highway to get my Covid jab. Lifespan maximization function is clearly perfectly

well-calibrated” (@jimpagles). Pagles exposes the immense risk cyclists constantly face on the street. The specific round-about Pagles complains about in his tweet intersects a highway, lacks sidewalks, and limits drivers’ view of intersecting traffic, including cyclists, to a few seconds at most. His tweet hones in on the point I made previously: cyclists’ comfort plays a major part in determining whether or not they travel on the sidewalk. For the most part, it seems that this discomfort is what’s pushing cyclists onto the sidewalk. It’s not like this lack of confidence among cyclists is misplaced. With the percentage of streets in the district equipped with bike lanes hovering around just 5% (Lefrak), it’s no wonder cyclists typically steer clear of riding in mixed traffic.

After realizing both that my initial perspective was wrong and that it’s not the cyclists who need to change their behavior, I dove headfirst into how the DC municipal government could turn this supposedly bike-friendly city into a truly bike-friendly city. Still wanting to get cyclists off the sidewalks, I found there was only one way to do so: address the aforementioned lack of safety. This entails building better bike infrastructure, ie. protected bike lanes, on major thoroughfares throughout the city. This, in turn, saves lives, eliminating the need to ride on the sidewalk. In the same set of research conducted by McNeil (previously cited on page 4,) DC cyclists rated protected bike lanes with physical separation a 5.5 on the same six-point scale. (McNeil) As opposed to the 2.9 given to riding in mixed traffic this demonstrates a drastic shift in the comfort of cyclists’, solidifying the effect safe infrastructure has on perceived safety and comfort.

While I’ve used the term “protected bike lane,” I haven’t given a clear definition of the term. Put simply, a protected bike lane is an umbrella term that refers to any bike lane with some form of buffer between cyclists and traffic, be that a painted buffer, parking, a curb, even a

planted strip between traffic and cyclists. In DC, most protected bike lanes consist of a painted buffer and flex posts, offering little to no physical protection for cyclists. While flex posts likely won't offer much physical protection for cyclists the perception of safety in a space of their own is likely to cause many to opt for the bike lane. The lack of substantial physical protection poses no issue however as flex post buffers are still easy for drivers to spot and avoid crossing into. Because of their small size, flex posts pose no issue to the flow of traffic or bikes, taking up as little space as possible while affording enough space between traffic and cyclists to allow them to feel comfortable in their environment. An additional change to major arterial streets that the city could make is reducing the width of streets, encouraging drivers to slow down and pay more attention to their surroundings without impeding traffic.

It's a no-brainer that keeping cyclists out of traffic reduces the number of crashes between bikes and motor vehicles, and may reduce the minuscule amount of incidents between pedestrians and cyclists as well. It's clear that improved biking infrastructure outside of downtown not only makes cyclists' feel more comfortable when riding, encouraging growth in the city's cyclist population, but it saves lives too.

As the district's cyclist population continues to grow and sidewalks become increasingly congested with both bikes and pedestrians, the issue of who gets priority is starting to become an issue at the heart of DC politics. Who really owns the sidewalks? Is it the supposedly self-centered cyclists seeking refuge from the admittedly dangerous streets of DC or, do the seemingly oblivious pedestrians, who sidewalks were originally meant to accommodate, still lie at the top of the hierarchy? Despite my acknowledgment that the streets aren't safe for bikes -at least not yet - from my perspective the idea that the sidewalk belongs to pedestrians still holds. I have, however, come to realize that the onus lies on the city to install the proper road

Stalker 7

infrastructure not currently present on many of the streets across the district. Until this happens I've learned to be happy conceding the sidewalk to a passing cyclist. I've also realized pedestrians may want to try being more accommodating to cyclists, whose safety is put in limbo when riding in traffic. Cyclists belong in the street, but in riding on the street they shouldn't be putting their lives at risk. As long as the city continues to thumb its nose at the needs of cyclists, my formerly clean white shoes will continue to be stained with mud. But I'm okay with that if the need to bike on the sidewalk continues to be present. After all, the safety of the district's cyclists is considerably more important than my formerly white shoes.

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Stalker 9

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