The Risks of Cycling: From Injury Prevention to a Population Health and Environmental Problem

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Theoretical framework

- The “Risk Society” thesis (Beck, 1992)
- Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and Risk Society (Latour, 2003)
- Can the debate about the risks of cycling be explained as a case of “re-modernization”? 
The rise of the bicycle helmet

Figure 1: Helmet laws around the globe, 2010 (Source: Helmetfreedom.org)

“There is unequivocal evidence that bicycle helmets reduce both the incidence and severity of head, brain and upper facial injuries. Making the wearing of bicycle helmets compulsory... is therefore an effective strategy for reducing bicycle-related injuries.”

The (ongoing) rise of the bicycle helmet

Province announces new bicycle helmet law

It will soon be mandatory for cyclists in Newfoundland and Labrador to wear a helmet.

Method

- Interviews, close readings
- The BHR database: scientific papers collected from the ISI Web of Knowledge using (“Bicycle”+“Risk”) and (“Bicycle”+“Health”) (on 23/12/2014)
- A total of 1,902 papers
- Analyzed using the CorTexT Platform:
  
  http://www.cortext.net/projects/cortext-manager.html
A focus on the “risk” cluster

"risk"
The risks of cycling: Injury prevention

The standard cyclist

helmeted  Un-helmeted

The standard bicycle crash

Prof. Frederick P. Rivara,
Harborview Medical Center
The risks of cycling: A population health and environmental problem

- Helmet laws can discourage cycling:
  1. Reduce physical activity $\rightarrow$ reduce public health
  2. Increase risk for remaining cyclists (“safety in numbers”)
  3. Prevent the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions

- Helmet laws and helmet promotion can cause “risk compensation”
Representing “the missing cyclists”

- Little data

- Shape of dose-response curve is unclear: most gains for inactive populations- but will they cycle?

- Fragmentation of the standard (potential) cyclist
Conclusions

- The debate follows the re-modernization thesis – in a case of a mundane risk

- The helmet has become a quasi-object

- The re-modernization may yet lead to the promotion of helmets