

City Cycling

Edited by John Pucher and Ralph Buehler

MIT Press, 2012

Reviewed by Rebecca Sanders

The book *City Cycling* (MIT Press, 2012), edited by John Pucher and Ralph Buehler, provides a comprehensive overview of research about bicycling in urban areas and efforts to promote it. Contributors include the editors, who authored several chapters and many of the papers cited throughout the book, and other reputable scholars who have published multiple papers on various aspects of bicycling as well as other transportation research.

From the beginning, the editors make clear that the book focuses on bicycling in cities, as they believe—and the cumulative research suggests they are correct—that these areas offer the greatest potential for substituting bicycle trips for car trips. Such substituted trips may contribute most significantly to the reduction of noise, air pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, congestion, and chronic disease, as well as to improved traffic safety and quality of life in cities and towns. Nevertheless, readers looking for information about bicycling in lower-density suburban and rural areas will likely still benefit from many of the chapters.

The book covers a wide spectrum of issues related to bicycling in cities, including: perceived and reported traffic risk, the health benefits of cycling, the practicality of cycling with regard to equipment and speed, integration with public transit, and bike sharing. It also contains a chapter focusing specifically on women, who often face more barriers to cycling (such as the need to carry passengers and a lower risk tolerance), as well as a chapter specifically about children. Finally, there are comparisons on the national and local level to provide perspective about the potential for cycling to become a mass mode, as well as the barriers to that occurring. With its range of topics, all accompanied by long lists of references, this collection will make a great resource for professors, researchers, and practitioners interested in urban cycling, particularly in the U.S.

The book's limited geographic focus may be the occasion for one of its more substantive critiques. With the exception of two chapters, the book focuses on studies and cases from the U.S., Western Europe (particularly the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, and the U.K.), and Australia. The case studies and research from Germany, the Netherlands, and Denmark reflect cities where years of consistent effort have created nearly ideal cycling environments. The case studies and research from the U.S., U.K., and Australia reflect efforts to increase cycling that are much younger,

but in some cases quite concerted and accompanied by innovation and experimentation. While these cases are instructive, a more diverse selection of studies would have better represented cycling conditions around the globe. The limited selection may not have resulted from a lack of trying—in at least one of the chapters, the authors noted that data comparability was a limiting factor.

Another critique is that the “vehicular cycling” perspective is neither well represented, nor portrayed in a particularly flattering light. “Vehicular cycling” refers to the position that cyclists are bicycle drivers who should behave and be treated like car drivers, and that the construction of bicycle-specific infrastructure promotes inequality between these two types of drivers. This is not to say that research is selectively presented—there is not much, if any, scholarly research about the effectiveness of vehicular cycling for increasing safety or encouraging bicycling. *City Cycling* portrays the key aspects of vehicular cycling, cyclist education and training, as necessary but insufficient aspects of increased urban cycling. Readers who disagree with this conclusion will likely also disagree with the conclusions of several of the chapters, which argue that infrastructure improvements, as well as education, are necessary to increase cycling.

Additionally, the chapter on “effective speed” argues that travel time by bicycle is effectively competitive with travel time by car when one accounts for the extra hours of work needed to pay for a car versus a bicycle. The chapter relies on these cost savings and the societal benefits of cycling to make its main argument, but seems to gloss over the attractiveness of the car in terms of flexibility, mobility, and safety—and the reality that for many people, these benefits outweigh the benefits of bicycling.

Finally, while the book provides a well-rounded picture of cycling, it is also uncompromisingly optimistic. It seems to apply better to dense cities, and does not acknowledge that the dispersed land uses and less-than-ideal weather conditions of, say, Dallas, Texas, may make cycling in such environments—even for short trips and with world-class infrastructure—unattractive to most for many months of the year. The dispersed land uses are an issue mostly in auto-centric nations like the U.S., Australia, and to a lesser extent, Canada, but practitioners and advocates from those countries are also the intended audience of the book. On the other hand, the principles espoused in the book would likely make cycling in the least friendly of those places (e.g., Dallas) more pleasant for those who choose to do it, and that is, in part, the point of the book.

Such critiques do not, in my opinion, dilute the overall quality of the book. It is a great resource for anyone interested in urban cycling (as well as cycling in general), and a welcome scholarly addition to a narrow slice of

the transportation literature that has, until now, been composed mostly of first-person narratives.

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Disclosure: Rebecca serves on the Transportation Research Board's Bicycling Committee with Ralph Buehler and three of the chapters' authors.