

Bicycles are dangerous

*Rob Eenink, SWOV Institute for Road Safety Research / FERSI president
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Every two years, we have our national road safety congress in the Netherlands, and our 2022 edition was a physical one. What a relief after two years of COVID, let's cross our fingers it will stay this way. As part of the congress, there was also a competition to win: the national road safety prize for innovation. This year the winner was a retired researcher who built a bicycle that solved two safety problems. Have a look at the video¹, I don't think you need to learn Dutch to understand it.

All over Europe more and more people cycle. The Heinrich Böll foundation, affiliated with the German Green party, published an article written by CONEBI (Confederation of the European Bicycle Industry) on the impressive growth of cycling and the cycling industry². The European bicycle industry employs 120.000 workers nowadays with an annual turnover of 14 billion Euros. It invests around one billion Euros in R&D alone, which is impressive.

It is known that as mobility grows, we see more road crashes. More cars mean more fatalities, in- and outside of a car. To reduce this negative outcome, in addition to infrastructural and behavioural improvements, car manufacturers must build safer cars. They have the money (according to ACEA more than 50 billion is spent on R&D yearly³), their customers want it (e.g., EuroNCAP), and society has strict regulations for it⁴. As a result of that, our Norwegian FERSI member states that cars are becoming 4% safer each year⁵. This all started at the end of the sixties⁶, when great improvements were made in better tyres, brakes, suspension, lighting, etc.

Similar to motorised traffic, the more people cycle the more cycling crashes occur. In my country we have the highest cycling rate in Europe, and as a result, a higher fatality rate on a bike rather than a car. More than two-thirds of the serious injuries in the Netherlands are cyclists, and over 80% of them do not involve a motor vehicle. Sure, we should wear helmets and must improve our cycling infrastructure, but we can't leave the bicycle itself out of the equation. How can we achieve that?

We need to acknowledge that there is a problem with the bicycle itself as well, and that there are ways to improve it. Like the improvements to cars, a bicycle can have safer tyres, brakes, suspension, and lighting. Three wheels, a protective shield⁷, ABS, et cetera. Maybe a bit out-of-the-box, but the car industry didn't start with ESC or AEBS in the sixties either. Consumers should ask for safer bicycles (a New Bicycle Assessment Programme?). The current system of self-regulation doesn't reward innovation. A bicycle is not a toy, it is an essential means of transport, and with one billion Euros available for R&D, finance seems less of a problem.

I love cycling and it's evident that we need cycling to make our society more healthy, clean, climate friendly and our cities more liveable. We also know people won't cycle if they perceive it as

¹ <https://www.nvvc-congres.nl/nvvp>

² <https://eu.boell.org/en/bicycle-industry-growing-at-speed>

³ <https://www.acea.auto/fact/research-and-innovation/>

⁴ <https://swov.nl/en/fact-sheet/safe-passenger-cars>

⁵ <https://www.toi.no/road-safety/a-new-car-is-40-pct-safer-than-a-10-year-old-car-article34729-831.html>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Unsafe_at_Any_Speed

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NfmqE7rLOWg>

dangerous⁸. It's great to see the industry is doing so well but, as the French say, 'noblesse oblige', you now need to make bicycles safer.

This column is written in a personal capacity and reflects only the author's view.

⁸ <https://swov.nl/en/publicatie/determinants-and-barriers-walking-cycling-and-using-personal-e-transporters-survey-nine>