
How the Danish cyclists were convinced to use a bicycle helmet – without a law

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Abstract

Over the past 20 years the use of bicycle helmet in Denmark has increased markedly. Today almost half of the cyclists in city traffic and 8 out of 10 cycling school children use a bicycle helmet. And this is despite the fact that there is no legislation on the use of bicycle helmets for cyclists in Denmark. This article explains how a combination of public campaigns, information, education, improved helmet design and improved availability has changed the Danes' attitudes towards helmets and affected behaviour. A necessary precondition for the effectiveness of the helmet promotion activities has been a persistent assessment of motivations and barriers among cyclists and continuous observational studies to monitor helmet use. The article includes 5 examples of previous and current interventions to promote helmet use.

Keywords

bicycle helmet use; observation study; road safety campaigns; behavioural change

Introduction

Denmark is often described as the second best cycling nation in the world after the Netherlands. Around 7 out of 10 Danes own a bicycle, and the average Dane rides around 500 km a year (1). Cycling is thus a key part of Danish culture and a daily means of transportation for both children and adults – whether for commuting, making errands, or recreational use.

In Denmark, there is no legislation on the use of bicycle helmets for cyclists. But despite the fact that it is not required to wear a helmet, a very high proportion of the cyclists choose to do so anyway. In short, during the last 20 years the bicycle helmet has gone from being a very rare and unusual sight to become a commonly used equipment among cyclists. And the Danes' attitude towards helmets has completely changed from "hate to love". This development is the result of a long-term strategy with the objective to reduce head injuries among cyclist by promoting helmets. The efforts have consisted of a combination of public campaigns, information, education, improved helmet design, and improved availability. All based on persistently monitoring of bicyclists' motivations and barriers through quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to choose the right strategy and ensure the most effective interventions and general communication. Continuous observational studies have been conducted almost every year to monitor helmet use, point out different target groups, follow up on the effects of campaigns etc.

How many cyclists wear a helmet?

Since 2004, The Danish Road Safety Council has conducted nationwide systematic bicycle helmet registrations among cyclists in Denmark. The observations are conducted in 33 cities all over the country. The use of bicycle helmets is observed in both city traffic at different times of the day and at schools in the morning. Roughly 10,000 cyclists in city traffic and 7,000 school children are observed every year.

In 2004, 6 % of the cyclists in city traffic used a helmet, while 33 % of the cycling children on the way to school used a helmet. Since then, a lot has happened. In 2015 the average helmet use had increased to 28 % in city traffic and 64 % among school children.

In 2021, the wearing rate was 48 % in city traffic - in other words, almost half of the cyclist wore a helmet in city traffic. In school traffic, 80 % of the cycling children used a helmet, varying from 94 % among the youngest children (6-9 years old) to 61 % among school children older than 12 years. (2)

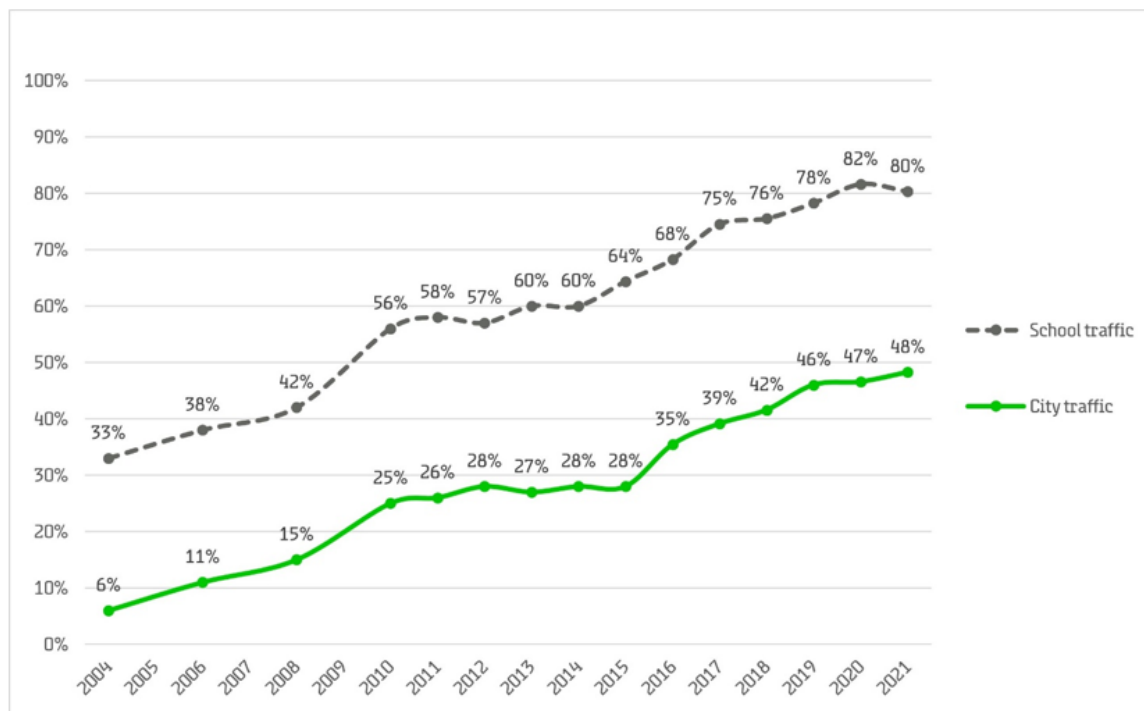


Figure 1: The use of helmets among cyclist in Denmark, 2004-2021.

So what has happened over the last 20 years? How were the Danes convinced that it is a good idea to use a bicycle helmet? And why do so many use helmets, even if it is not required by law?

Promoting voluntary use

The campaigns and information around bicycle helmets in Denmark began around 1990, centered around the national organization, the Danish Road Safety Council, with support from municipalities and regions. Many municipalities and regions developed and conducted their own local campaigns besides the national ones.

In the beginning, the national campaigns were mainly targeted at parents to convince them to make their young children wear a helmet, by using parents' urge to protect their children as a key motivational factor. Schools has been another important target group to make bicycle helmets a norm among school children. Over the years, the campaigns have evolved and have expanded the target groups to include parents as role models, elderly cyclists, university students and the general adult cyclists. Teenagers and young adults (16-25 years old) have always been the hardest group to convince and today they still have the lowest wearing rates (35 % in 2021).

From the beginning, the main strategy by the Danish Road Safety Council has been promoting voluntary use of bicycle helmet and not advocating for legislation. This strategy was chosen, since

surveys showed, that a substantial percentage of cyclists said they would stop cycling or cycle less, if helmets became mandatory. And this is not desirable, since cycling has many benefits, especially for public health, the environment, and congestion. Besides, there has never been a political wish to introduce bicycle helmets legislation in Denmark.

Promoting voluntary use also has the advantage, that cyclists who do not want to wear a helmet, simply can choose not to do so. This has most likely been one of the main reasons for the generally very positive attitude towards helmets in the Danish population, that exists today - even among non-users. The Danish Cyclist Federation also recommends and actively supports voluntary use of bicycle helmets and has done so for many years.

Key elements in the Danish approach

The Danish approach has had 3 main elements:

- Awareness – informing about the injury reducing effect of bicycle helmets
- Availability – making bicycle helmets easy to get and cheap to buy
- Attractiveness – improving design and working on making it a normal, sensible and attractive thing to wear a helmet, including being a role model for others, especially for children and grand children

All along, the positive development has been helped through the general technical improvement in helmet design coming from the helmet manufactures. 15-20 years ago, helmets were generally quite ugly, heavier than today, and not very well assorted. Today the helmets have improved in function and weight and the variety in design is extensive, so that everyone can find a helmet that suits their own style.

Five examples of interventions

1990 – now: Educational materials and helmet policies in schools

Since the early nineties, bicycle helmets have been promoted in schools, for example through educational materials, school policies and the so called “Bicycle test”, which is a test that takes place in 6th grade and includes an evaluation of the children’s’ bicycle skills in traffic. Over the years, the bicycle helmet has become a fully integrated and natural part of all bicycle and road safety educational materials in schools. Today, it would be unthinkable in most schools to go on a bicycle trip during school hours without every child wearing a helmet.

2009: Cheap designer helmets in supermarkets

In 2009, the Danish Road Safety Council asked four well known designers to design a limited edition of helmets for both children and adults. The helmets were sold in “Netto” supermarkets (a supermarket chain) at a low price (app. 25 Euros). The profit from the sale was donated to the Brain Injury Society. The helmets were sold out very quickly, so the campaign was later repeated. This showed that quality, good design, availability, and a good price is an important driver for increasing helmet use.

A similar approach is used in the current project “Helmet to go” (started in 2015 and still running), where helmets are sold to students at a low price in pop up shops at university campuses.

2009: Public design contest – “myhelmet.dk”

To increase public interest in bicycle helmets and their design, the Danish Road Safety Council launched a national public design contest. Everyone was invited to digitally design their own favorite helmet. The interest was immense, and the creativity was surprising. More than 7,000 designs came in from people of all ages and the project got widespread media coverage.

2014-2020 “Annoying Parents” - Campaign to raise helmet use among tweens

Following a stagnation in the use of helmets among 10–12-year-old children in 2010-2014, a new nationwide campaign - “Annoying Parents” - was launched. The campaign focused on the parents of preteen school children and praised parents for insisting that their children use bicycle helmets. The parents were encouraged to make their children wear helmets “Because I say so”, talk to other parents about helmet use, make agreements with other parents in school, and last but not least: wear a helmet themselves. The campaign consisted of several humorous music videos that went viral on YouTube. An evaluation of the first campaign video in 2014 showed that 46 % of target group (parents with children aged 8 to 12 years old) had been speaking with their children about the campaign [3]. One of the videos was the most watched video on YouTube in Denmark in 2020 with more than 12 million views. After the campaign, the helmet wearing rate among 10 – 12-year-old cycling school children went up from 62 % to 88 %.

2021 – Helmet has always been a bright idea – The Viking campaign

Most adult cyclists think that helmet is a good idea, even if they don’t use it themselves. The non-users are able to come up with many different “bad excuses” and explanations as to why they do not wear a helmet. This insight is used in the campaign “Helmet has always been a bright idea”, which especially is targeted at adult male cyclists, and it makes fun of all their excuses. Male adult cyclists were pointed out as a target group, since observational studies showed that their wearing rates were falling behind the wearing rate of women (2). The direct effect on helmet use has not yet been evaluated, but the campaign has been very well received in both Denmark and abroad and the evaluation of the campaign has been positive. Among cyclists not wearing a helmet, 71 % found the campaign relevant for themselves and 35 % of cyclists not wearing a helmet said that the campaign had made them want to buy a helmet (4).

Other possible explanations

While the campaigns promoting helmet use might explain some of the increased helmet use among cyclists in Denmark, it most likely cannot explain the full extent of the increase in bicycle helmet use. One other potential explanation for the increased use of bicycle helmets is self-enhancing processes. As using a helmet becomes more common, cyclist do not stand out by wearing a helmet. This in turn partly removes one of the barriers for cyclists to wear a helmet.

Furthermore, as wearing bicycle helmets has become the norm among young school children, it might be perceived as socially unacceptable not to ensure that your child wears a helmet.

The situation today

When adult non-users of helmets are asked, why they don’t wear a helmet, the most common explanations are: “I want to buy one, but I just haven’t done it yet”, “My hair gets ruined”, “I forget it”, “I look silly”, “I am not used to it” and “I don’t want to carry it around”. Nearly no one says that they don’t believe that a helmet reduces the injury risk. It is commonly accepted - even by the non-users - that it is a sensible thing to wear a helmet as a cyclist.

The proportion who in quantitative surveys report that they would stop cycling or cycle less, if helmets were mandatory has been reduced over the years. In 2021 it was 10 % compared to 25 % in 2013 (5), underlining the increased acceptance of helmets.

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