

Are Cyclists the Real Menaces on Our Roads?

Bicycles and their riders: a healthy, green form of transport or hazardous road menaces? Some argue that MPs should introduce a new offence of causing death by dangerous cycling. But how much of a danger do these two-wheeled travellers really pose?

There is little that divides UK public opinion more sharply than cyclists. Mention cyclists at a dinner party and the debate will begin. To their supporters, Britain's bike-riders are environmentally friendly, clean, commuters-with-a-conscience, who ease congestion on the nation's roads while keeping themselves fit. However to plenty of motorists, they are lycra-clad menaces, demons of the highways, jumping red lights, hurtling past pedestrians on pavements and ignoring The Highway Code.

MP Andrea Leadsom has introduced a Private Members bill to create new crimes of causing death or serious injury through dangerous or reckless cycling. She wants dangerous cyclists to be fairly punished and she cites the case of Rhiannon Bennett, who was 17 when she was killed by a speeding cyclist in 2007. The cyclist had shouted at Rhiannon to "move because I'm not stopping" and was merely fined £2,200. They avoided jail. According to the Department for Transport, over an eight year period 18 people were killed by cycles and 434 people were seriously injured by cycles. Surely with figures like these, something needs to be done? But how much of a danger do bicycles actually pose on the nation's roads?

Bike riders insist it is they who are vulnerable. Of the 13,272 collisions between cycles and cars in 2008, 52 cyclists died but no drivers were killed. Many argue that what we should be doing is to improve road safety in general; ensuring that all our road-users are fully conversant with The Highway Code whether they are on four wheels or two. "Most cyclists are pretty timid," argues keen cyclist Daniel Peters. "We are vulnerable and we know that. If a bike meets a lorry it is easy to predict the outcome."

Indeed, Professor Stephen Glaister, of the RAC Foundation, suggests much of the hostility on the roads stems from a lack of understanding and suggests that making the legislation apply the same, whether you are on four wheels or two, would reassure drivers that the rules were being applied fairly. I have to say I agree. Educate both drivers and cyclists more and treat them equally.

