

CityLab | Transportation

## Cyclists and Pedestrians Can End Up Spending More Each Month Than Drivers

They may buy less per visit. But over the course of a month, bikers out-consumed drivers at bars, restaurants and convenience stores.



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By Emily Badger

December 5, 2012 at 8:25 AM EST

Kelly Clifton has heard this stereotype a number of times: "Cyclists are just a bunch of kids who don't have any money," says the professor of civil and environmental engineering at Portland State University. "They ride their bikes to a coffee shop, they sit there for four hours with their Macintoshes, they're not really spending any money."

If you're a shopkeeper with such suspicions, you're probably not on board with any plan that would cut down on parking right outside your door. Cyclists are the ones with time to kill; drivers are the ones with money.

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This perception is problematic in a place like Portland, where the bike-friendly city government is now looking to extend the reach of bike infrastructure - and the appeal of bikes themselves - to newer riders and neighborhoods farther afield from the urban core. "As we move out beyond those areas into more auto-oriented areas," Clifton says, "we start to see businesses say, 'Hey, wait a minute. You're taking away on-street parking to put in bike lanes, you're taking away the one parking spot in front of my store to put in a bike corral. I don't see many bikers around here. So what does this mean for me?'"

Until now there hasn't been much empirical evidence to allay such concerns. Clifton and several colleagues have attempted to fill that research gap in a project for the [Oregon Transportation Research and Education Consortium](#) (read a PDF of the draft report [here](#)). They surveyed 1,884 people walking out of area convenience stores, restaurants and bars, and another 19,653 who'd just done their supermarket shopping. Some of the results are unsurprising: Drivers still make up a plurality of customers to all of these businesses. And, with greater trunk capacity, they far outspend people who travel to the grocery store by foot, bike or transit.



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But for all of the other business types examined, bikers actually out-consumed drivers over the course of a month. True, they often spent less *per visit*. But cyclists and pedestrians in particular made more frequent trips (by their own estimation) to these restaurants, bars and convenience stores, and those receipts added up. This finding is logical: It's a lot easier to make an impulse pizza stop if you're passing by an aromatic restaurant on foot or bike instead of in a passing car at 35 miles an hour. Such frequent visits are part of the walkable culture. Compare European communities - where it's common to hit the bakery, butcher and fish market on the way home from work - to U.S. communities where the weekly drive to Walmart's supermarket requires an hour of dedicated planning.

"It's not just a phenomenon born of the need to carry things," Clifton says. Walkable (and bikeable) communities by definition facilitate a more frequent interaction between patrons and businesses. This means these bikers and pedestrians are also more regular customers. "That also says something about marketing," Clifton says, "about customer loyalty, about neighborhood-based businesses."



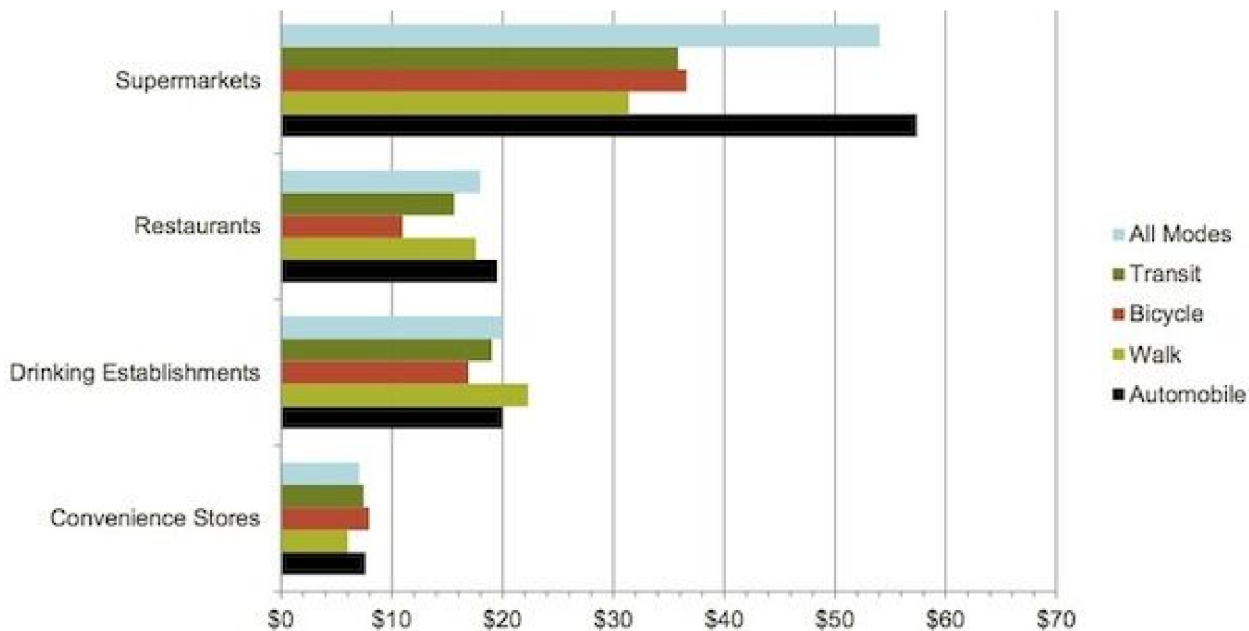
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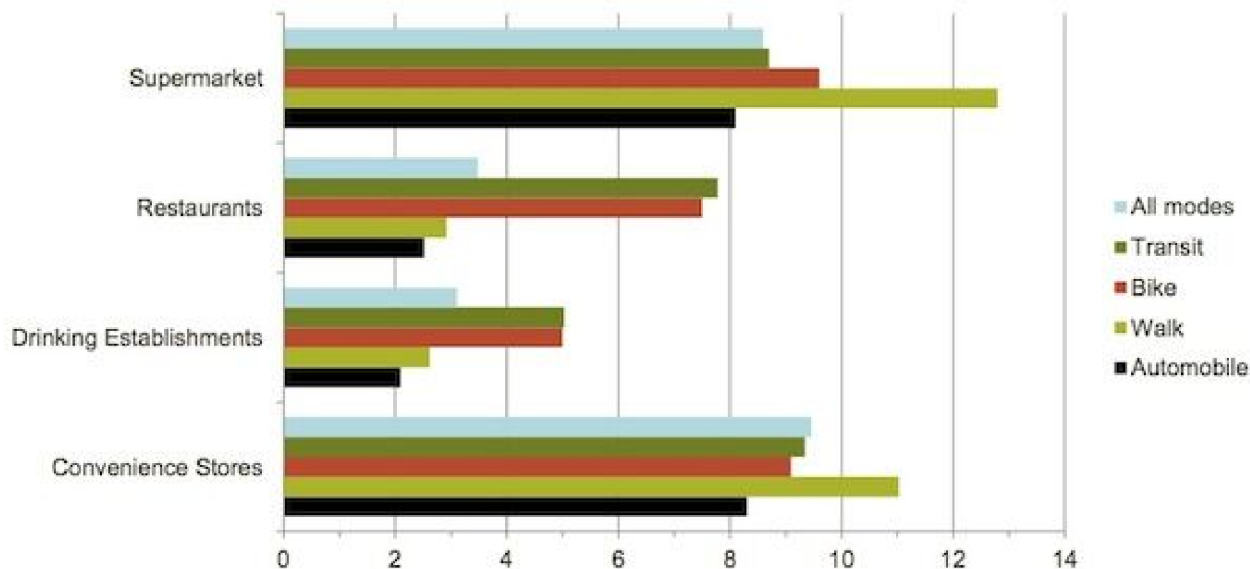
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The study examined 89 businesses across the region, 11 of them grocery stores. At the bars, convenience stores and restaurants (all high-turnover sit-down pizza and Mexican spots), researchers snagged consumers on their way out between June and early October of last year. They gave them a 5-to-10 minute tablet questionnaire about their demographics and travel behavior, how they'd traveled that day, what they'd spent, and how often they estimated they visited the business each month. The researchers coordinated with a local grocery store chain to survey customers there during a single week this April.

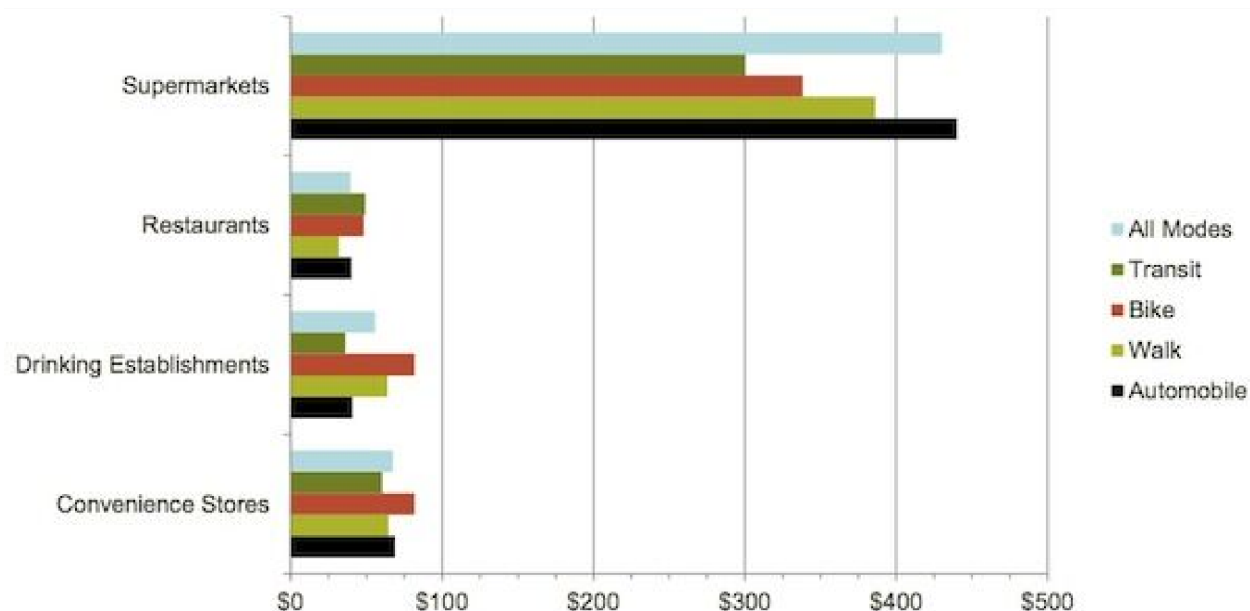
Their findings are neatly summarized in these three graphs. This first one shows how much consumers spent on average per trip, by transportation mode:



Here, people estimated how many trips they took per month:



And this is the total estimate of consumer spending per month:



There are obviously some other factors at play here. Families with cars are less likely to eat out than single young professionals on a bike. And we'd all prefer that drivers run up smaller bar tabs than pedestrians. Clifton also raises another possibility (although this particular study can't verify it): "Does Portland have a green dividend?" she asks, citing a concept coined by economist Joe Cortright. Cars are costly. And Portland's green infrastructure means many people don't have to foot that expense. "Do we then have more money in our pockets," Clifton asks, "to spend on other things?"

As Portland begins to make tougher decisions about bike infrastructure, this is an intriguing point. The "young and fearless," as Clifton calls them, are

already biking there. These are the riders who will happily dodge cars and thunderstorms without much dedicated infrastructure. Now the city needs to coax what Clifton calls the "interested but concerned." These are the people who will require a higher level of accommodation - separated bike lanes, actual bike parking - and therefore some tougher conversations about what that might mean for scarce resources and roadway (and for the drivers who might be impacted by reallocating them).

"If only we had asked these questions when we invested in the automobile," Clifton says. "On the one hand, we're asking the right questions. But we're also holding non-motorized modes up to a different standard than we have held the automobile."

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