

CityLab | Transportation

Tired of Cyclists Riding on the Sidewalk? Build More Bike Lanes

In places with good bicycling infrastructure, research shows that sidewalk riding goes down even as ridership goes up.



Nate Baird/Flickr

By Eric Jaffe

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The NYPD just launched a two-week campaign to enforce city bike laws that it's calling Operation Safe Cycle. This should go over about as well with the cycling community as Crystal Pepsi did with all humanity (the use of "operation" seems especially inappropriate, given its military connotation). But besides being unpopular in the short-term, the heightened enforcement might also be a poor use of public resources in the long run.

Take one of the behaviors the NYPD intends to crack down on during its campaign: riding on the sidewalk. That's a problem in lots of cities where cycling is growing, and the concern for pedestrian safety is legitimate. Some cities ban sidewalk riding outright (e.g. New York and Chicago), some ban it in certain districts (D.C. and Boston), some place so many restrictions on it

that they might as well ban it (Seattle), and some ban it for jerk riders only (Los Angeles).

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No question, preventing cyclists from riding on the sidewalk improves pedestrian well-being. But there's an unintended consequence: even as such laws and initiatives protect of walkers, they may in turn endanger riders—and to a greater degree. Yes, some cyclists may ride on the sidewalk to annoy the universe. Many more no doubt do so because they find sharing the road with cars to be exceedingly dangerous, as John Kelly of the *Washington Post* recently reported:

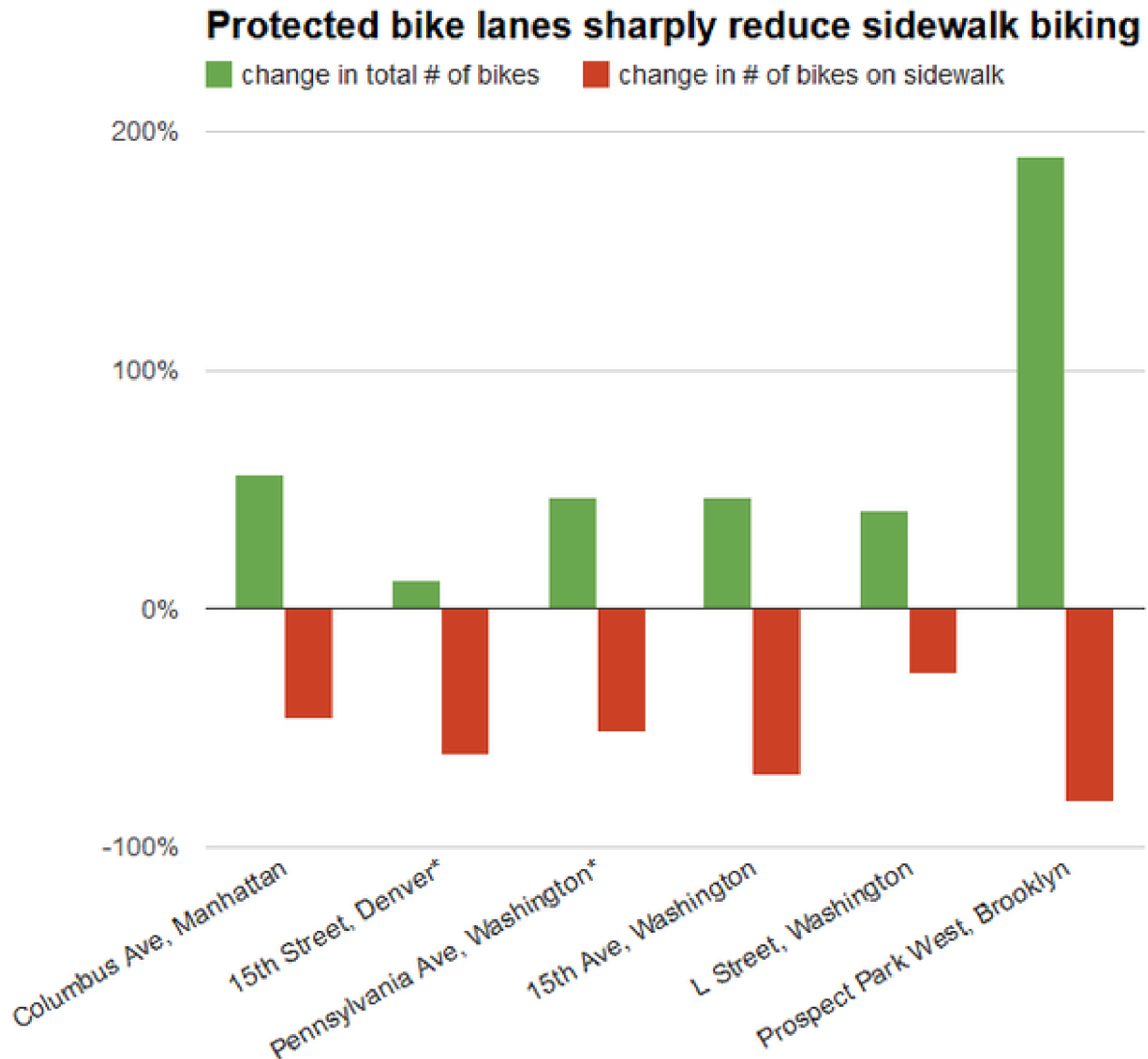
"The reason that cyclists use the sidewalks is that they don't want to die," wrote the District's John Glad. "If and when they are provided with dedicated bike lanes that are not accessible to drivers, they will be only too happy to use them."

Kelly is right that this "lesser of two evils" argument isn't fair to pedestrians. But rider Glad is right that cyclists would prefer bike lanes over streets and sidewalks alike. As the *Post* later reported, the share of cyclists using the sidewalk declined on three D.C. streets after bike lanes were created—by 70 percent on 15th Avenue, 52 percent on Pennsylvania Avenue, and 27 percent on L Street—even as bike ridership in these same corridors rose.

And the District is no anomaly. A collaboration between PeopleForBikes and America Walks found similar trends in New York and Denver. On 15th Street in Denver, cycling rose 12 percent after bike lanes arrived, while sidewalk riding declined 61 percent. On Columbus Avenue in Manhattan, ridership

rose 56 percent, with sidewalk use down 46 percent. And on Prospect Park West in Brooklyn, ridership soared 190 percent, and sidewalk riding fell 81 percent.

Here's the data in a single chart, via the two organizations:



The sampling is small, and it's admittedly hand-picked by advocates, and even if these numbers held true for all U.S. cities, that doesn't excuse scofflaw riding. Cycling haters may be a sign of cycling's success, but hateful cycling will only make that success harder to maintain and advance. If the cycling community truly believes more bike lanes will end sidewalk riding, it might get ahead of the issue by offering to accept steeper fines for violating sidewalk rules in places where bike lanes *do* exist.

Still, as far as public health at large is concerned, the case for investing in cycling infrastructure seems like a far stronger one than the case for splurging on enforcement campaigns—especially when you add in the other known benefits of bike lanes. Both approaches make city sidewalks safer for pedestrians. Only one makes the whole streetscape safer for all.

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