

Brussels, 03 October 2014

Re: Response to an initiative to impose bicycle helmet legislation

Dear Minister,

We have been asked to write to you by NaTochak concerning an initiative by your administration to impose bicycle helmet legislation. We would like to offer the position of the European Cyclists' Federation in support of NaTochak with regards to the issue of bicycle helmets and bicycle helmet legislation.

Helmet legislation

The European Cyclists' Federation is very much opposed to an all-encompassing coercion of helmet wearing for cyclists. The only really known effect of helmet compulsion laws is that it causes a large reduction in the number of cyclists. A reduction in the number of cyclists has shown to increase the risk to each individual cyclist. Cyclists typically live longer and healthier lives; serious head injuries are rare and the evidence in favour of helmet wearing and helmet laws is weak. The main effect of helmet laws has not been to improve cyclists' safety but to discourage cycling, undermining its health and other benefits.

ECF promotes cycling and road safety, we therefore oppose mandatory helmet laws because:

- Countries that have introduced mandatory helmet measures have commonly seen a reduction in cycling numbers of 20-30%
- *Because of the huge health benefits of everyday cycling, any road safety intervention that reduces or impedes the number of cyclists will always bring about a public health disbenefit*, the very opposite of the aims of the intervention (de Jong 2012)
- Studies show that countries that promote cycling and that have many cycling commuters, experience "safety in numbers" (i.e. the larger the number of cyclists – the safer it is for each individual cyclist). Reduced cycling through mandatory helmet legislation thus increases the risk of injury to remaining cyclists (Jacobsen 2003)



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- Mandatory helmet laws discourage cycling by portraying it as abnormally dangerous, although evidence shows that you are less likely to be killed in a mile of cycling than in a mile of walking (Wardlaw 2002)
- Injured cyclists are less likely to have head injuries than injured pedestrians or car occupants (ONISR 2005)
- Bicycle helmets are only designed to withstand minor knocks and bumps, not being hit by motor vehicles; this is made clear in the EU standard
- Countries that have introduced mandatory helmet laws, have failed to reduce head injury rates despite increased helmet wearing rates (Cameron, Heiman and Neiger, 1992; Smith and Milthorpe, 1993; Scuffham and Langley, 1997)

Better safety measures

We call upon your administration to focus on well-established measures to promote cycling and cyclists' well-being, for example;

- Reducing speed – this is one of the best ways of reducing cycling (and other road user) casualties. Excessive speed is a direct factor in about a fifth of all collisions and is a major contributory factor in a third of all road deaths. It has been estimated that a 10% reduction in the mean speed of traffic will result in a 37.8% reduction of the number of fatalities (Elvik, R et al (2004). To put this in perspective it was estimated that a 10% reduction in "Exposure to darkness" and "Drink-driving" gives a reduction in fatalities of 1.7% and 1.0% respectively.
- Separate infrastructure – Where speed or volume of traffic cannot be reduced cyclists should be physically separated from motorised traffic. There is a large amount of good examples of infrastructure design from around the world, from countries such as the Netherlands, Denmark, and Germany for example.

In Conclusion

- Bicycle helmets should not be mandatory, cyclists should have the choice as to whether they want to wear a helmet or not. Banning cycling without a helmet *will always result in a public health disbenefit*
- There are many better safety interventions than helmet legislation. The major one being a reduction in motor vehicle speed

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Bernhard Ensink', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Dr Bernhard Ensink

Secretary General,
European Cyclists' Federation