Healthy Built Environments
Sharing the path

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As our cities grow to accommodate more people in high rise apartment buildings, close living will become more the Australian norm. So too will sharing public facilities such as recreational facilities and pathways. Together with the popularity of active transport, cycling and walking along shared pathways will be commonplace. Planners need to be aware of the issues related to shared pathways as more and more people use these facilities for transport and recreation.

Safety

The interaction between pedestrians and cyclists on shared pathways is causing increasing safety concerns. However, the perception of danger is much greater than the actual risk. Observations of 50,000 pedestrians and 12,000 bicyclists on NSW shared pathways found only five near misses and no actual contact between cyclists and pedestrians.1 Nevertheless, we cannot simply dismiss perceptions, as the perceived risks can be a significant barrier for walking, particularly for older people. Management of shared pathways is becoming increasingly important as cities densify and we compete for limited space to commute and recreate.

While there is no single conflict generating mechanism, numerous factors have been identified as significant. The behaviour of people using the shared path and the physical environment, together with interaction between these two factors, can impact upon shared path conflict. Path widths and cycling speeds are also key factors influencing pedestrian perceptions of safety on shared paths.

Solutions

To minimise conflict, we need holistic solutions that meet the requirements of both bike riders and pedestrians. A suite of solutions are necessary to address local environmental, demographic and cultural circumstances. Broad measures to minimise conflict between cyclists and pedestrians include integrated strategy and planning, engineering works, traffic management, urban design, place making, and education/behaviour change programs.2,3

A special session at last year’s Walk21 conference explored evidence based measures for managing conflicts between cyclists and pedestrians on shared paths.4 Practical solutions include duplicating paths to promote walking and cycling separation, widening shared paths to increase capacity, safety reviews and subsequent design solutions to minimise potential shared path hazards, rule enforcement, and behaviour change programs.

Where to from here?

One well researched behaviour change program is the City of Sydney’s ‘Share the Path’ awareness campaign, which aims to educate pedestrians and bike riders on how to use shared paths safely and considerately. The program uses face-to-face sessions between bike riders, pedestrians and council staff at sites with high foot and bike traffic during peak commuting periods to disseminate key messages and reward target behaviour (such as cyclists’ bell ringing). The program also provides suggestions for establishing a similar program in other local government areas.

Other specific conflict management strategies and numerous best practice case studies from across the country are provided on the Australian Bicycle Council website5 and there are NSW specific case studies on the PCAL website6.

Endnotes

4 See: www.walk21sydney.net/presentations/
5 See: www.bicyclecouncil.com.au

Sharing the path safely: Fernleigh PCAL case study (Source: PCAL)