

TIMES COLONIST

Cyclists, pedestrians collide on Vancouver's mean streets

Susan Lazaruk / The Province
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Cyclists and pedestrians cross the street Thursday at Howe and Robson in downtown Vancouver. Photograph By Arlen Redekop

A cyclist clipping along at 30 kilometres per hour through Vancouver's Downtown Eastside collided with a pedestrian who stepped off the curb. The cyclist suffered soft-tissue damage and the pedestrian much worse: Broken bones and a head injury. The pedestrian is suing, and the cyclist is countersuing.

A second cyclist travelling the Central Valley Greenway, a mixed-used path between Vancouver and New Westminster, rounded a curve and ran straight into a pedestrian. The cyclist was injured badly enough to be off work; the pedestrian was relatively unscathed. The cyclist is suing.

American Charmaine Mitchell was sent flying off the Stanley Park Seawall this summer to the rocks on the beach three metres below by speeding cyclists, according to media reports. She broke her back in three places and was left with a smashed knee and toe. Police investigated and laid no charges, telling her it was a civil matter.

The horrific crashes are the worst examples of what can go wrong when cyclists and pedestrians try to occupy the same space.

Bikers are growing in numbers but because crashes that don't involve a vehicle, a police report or a hospital visit aren't reported, it's not known if they're crashing into pedestrians more frequently.

A UBC study that tracked bike crashes through hospital emergency room statistics in Vancouver and Toronto in 2008 and 2009 found 46 cyclists were hurt badly enough to end up in hospital.

That meant about one-in-10 of all bike crashes that sent cyclists to hospitals was caused by a collision with a person, other cyclist, skater or animal, according to a report called the Bicyclists' Injuries and the Cycling Environment.

Co-author and SFU assistant professor Meghan Winters said: "What stands out is that number. It was a fair bit. But I can't tell you whether they're on the rise."

Winters said a more recent study that has yet to be published found more than half of those crashes happened on multi-use paths, sidewalks, bike-specific bike paths and cycle-tracks (which run parallel to roads but are separated).

The rest were on major streets or side streets. (Off-road bike injuries weren't included.)

"The seawall showed a higher risk than we thought it would," said Winters, who noted that some of the trouble spots, including the seawall in southeast False Creek, have been fixed.

Others note that it's "inevitable" the number of these types of collisions are on the rise.

"With more cyclists, you're going to have an increase in cyclists colliding with pedestrians," said Sgt. Jack Sarna of the Vancouver police's traffic unit.

"Cyclists and pedestrians, they both have forgotten how to cross the street, or what a stop sign or a red light is, especially cyclists," he said.

"I stop cyclists who run a red light and ticket them and they look at me like, 'Well, I'm a cyclist,' and I have to tell them just because they're a cyclist doesn't mean they can do what they want on the road."

And Sarna said pedestrians are guilty of disregarding their surroundings while texting, using their phone or walking with earbuds in.

"The bikes are going 20, 25 km/h and pedestrians are crossing (bike paths) and they're not looking," he said. "It's a common occurrence."

David Hay, a lawyer who defends cyclists in such crashes and has two cases on the go, said that in his experience there has been an increase in bike-pedestrian accidents.

"I would attribute that to the increasing number of bikes on the roads," said Hay. "It's inevitable."

But Anne Harris, a co-author of the UBC bike study, said if more bike paths are installed, other road users will be more aware of them and crashes will drop because of the "safety in numbers factor."

Erin O'Melinn of Hub, a cycling advocacy group, said the increase in the number of separated bike lanes in Vancouver has reduced cycling on sidewalks by 80 per cent, and presumably therefore crashes, but users still need to be educated.

"Often pedestrians don't look the other way" when crossing bike paths and cyclists aren't using bells or their voices to let pedestrians know they're coming.

O'Melinn said it's up to ICBC (with more cycling questions on driving tests), local municipalities, TransLink and the B.C. transportation ministry to offer education to cyclists and pedestrians.

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