SUSTAINABLE TRAVEL

GETTING ON YOUR BIKE

Re-set

lessons from lockdown

GETTING ON YOUR BIKE

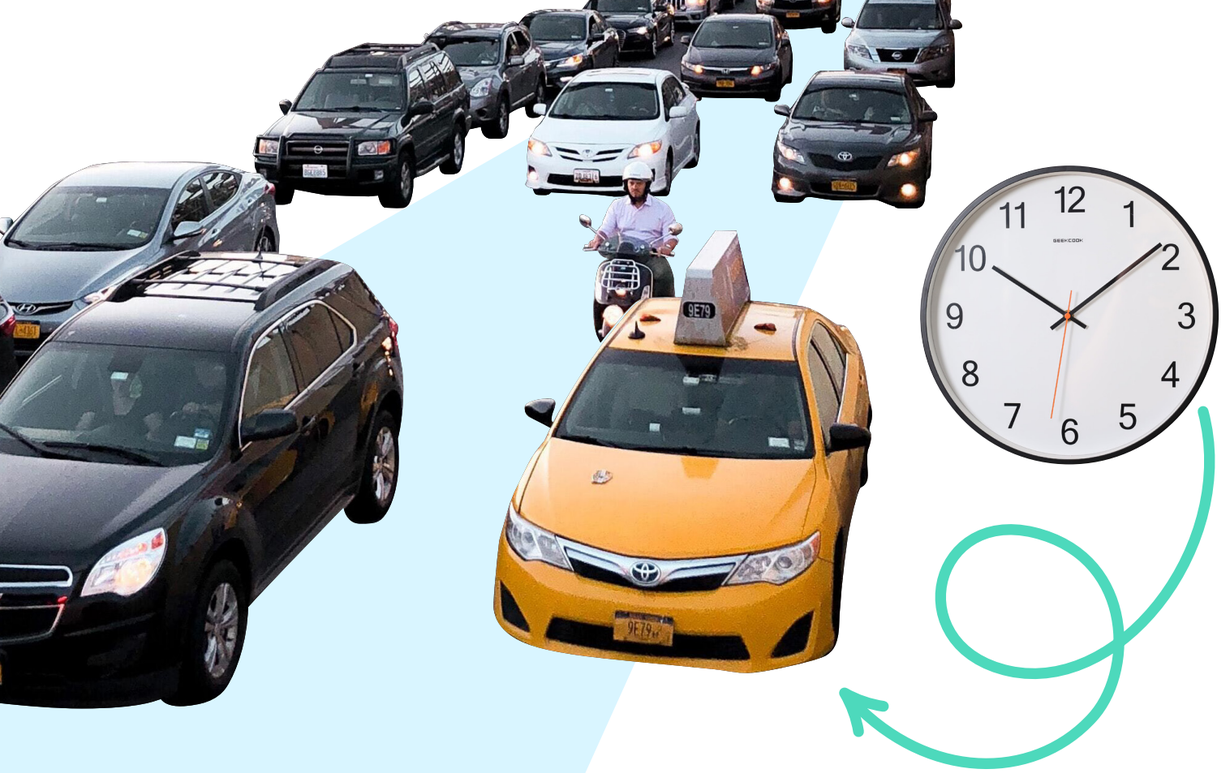
How people found better ways to get around that were good for health, cleaner air, more peaceful and safer communities

The climate-friendly bicycle – still overlooked by many city planners – enjoyed a revival throughout the pandemic lockdowns. As the virus took hold, fears over transmission grew and governments introduced stay-at-home orders, car and public transport use fell dramatically. Pictures of formerly congested international megacities spread showing peaceful, empty highways and clearer skies, while pavements and parks grew busy as millions rediscovered the benefits of walking and cycling.

While there was **limited evidence to suggest that viral transmission was higher on public transport**,[1] concerned citizens around the world looked to alternative ways of getting around. In New York, **bus and rail ridership dropped by 74%**[2] at one point even before the government closed down the transit system.

Some people returned to the car, but others returned to older technologies to keep safe and also to get some exercise. The bike, **first developed by German inventor Karl von Drais in 1817**[3] and seen as a symbol of social liberation, was back in vogue. People dusted off the saddles of bikes long abandoned at the back of garages, while others hit the stores to pick-up some new wheels. Bike suppliers **struggled to keep up with renewed demand**[4] and a **global shortage of bicycles was declared**[5] that is expected to last well into 2022.

People around the world were getting on their bikes in huge numbers. In the USA, **one in ten American adults reported riding a bike for the first time in a year or longer since the onset of the pandemic.**[6] Across the Atlantic, in the UK, **cycling surged by 200%**[7] during the initial lockdown on weekends and **100% on weekdays.**[8] Data from over 100 European cities showed growing cycling rates of between **11% and 48% on average, generating health benefits of somewhere between $1 billion and $7 billion.**[9] Bike use in the Argentinian city of **Buenos Aires saw an increase of 129%,**[10] with a similar increase identified across China's bikeshare infrastructure.



This truly global phenomenon was enabled by a variety of factors – some of which could be used to lock-in and encourage continued bike use for years to come. The first, and probably the most profound, was that people found themselves with more time. Working from home had almost eradicated the daily commute and lockdown restrictions closed off many of the social or sporting activities that people would normally have taken part in.

The bike emerged as one of the most accessible and reliable methods of transportation during the lockdowns: and it was supported by governments and business. Authorities around the world – both national and local – used the temporary drop in road traffic as an opportunity to reconfigure streetscapes in favour of the bicycle. As of July 2020, nearly **2,600km of new cycling infrastructure had been announced**[11] across European cities, and around **1,500km of schemes have been implemented.**[12] In the Colmbian city of Bogota, **47 miles of bike lanes were introduced**[13] and in the car-dominated city of Oakland in California, **74 miles of road were closed to cars and given over to bicycles and pedestrians**[14] instead.

"The pandemic accelerated the development of cycling schemes around the world and revealed what many of us who have been working in this space for years have long known: that there is great and heretofore untapped demand for safer streets for riding bicycles for transportation. Smart cities understood the obligation to satisfy that demand."

Doug Gordon, Co-host, The War on Cars podcast

In Britain, a raft of Low Traffic Neighbourhoods (LTNs) came into existence, which managed to **halve road traffic injuries in London neighbourhoods that had introduced them.**[15] When the infrastructure was provided for citizens, they did not think twice about getting on their bike. Confidence and feeling safe is key. In European countries like the Netherlands, Denmark and Sweden urban cycling has been normalised and made safe with dedicated bike infrastructure. Where that is missing, like in the UK, it has held cycling back. **Sixty six percent of adults in the UK think that cycling on the roads is too dangerous**,[16] with the percentage as high as **71% amongst women.**[17] But experience from the pandemic shows that protected and dedicated bike infrastructure could unlock a cycling revolution. If people feel safe, they are more likely to consider cycling.

The bike was transformed from a leisure activity to an essential service. At the heart of the lockdowns, bicycle maintenance shops were **given exemptions**[18] to stay open in the UK, USA and many European nations too, putting them on par with supermarkets and pharmacies in terms of their necessity. Bikes were also seen as a vital way in which front line key workers could get to work and continue keeping us safe throughout the pandemic. The Wheels for Heroes campaign, launched by the British bike manufacturer Brompton, raised enough funds to provide **1000 bicycles to more than 3,000 health workers up and down the UK.**[19] Repair and maintenance needs to grow to support increased cycling. Community schemes such as the **Community Bike Workshop**[20] in the Welsh Dyfi Valley, set a great example. Their weekly social space offers advice on fixing bikes, practical help, tools and donated second-hand spare parts.

The big lesson underlined by the experience of the pandemic, is that if you want more people to cycle, you have to make it easy. That means protected bike lanes, secure lock ups for bicycles and easy access to bike repair and maintenance. But that brings all the benefits of better health, less pollution, safer streets and more pleasant places to live. And, compared to other transport infrastructure these things are incredibly cheap to provide.

Andrew Simms, New Weather Institute

Alongside the infrastructure were the incentives. City governments quickly realised that boosting bikes would be a way to cut down on air pollution, which is **responsible for around 4.2 million deaths a year globally**.[21] The French government ring fenced **€20 million so that all citizens were eligible for bike repairs of up to €50**[22] and transformed car parking spaces into cycle shelters. Under even more recent plans, **French citizens can claim up to €2,500 towards an electric bike**[23] if they trade in their old gas-guzzling car. In Italy, **the government allocated €210 million for a cash-back programme,**[24] where Italian residents who purchased a vehicle without an engine – such as a bicycle or e-scooter – would receive a €500 stipend. And there is substantial appetite for these trade-in schemes, with research suggesting that e-bike incentives **are over twice as effective as electric vehicle grants.**[25] E-bikes will be particularly useful in rural locations where longer distance journeys are more common and only the fittest, greenest or poorest currently use their bikes as daily transport.

The lockdowns fuelled a bicycle revival for many reasons, it was cheap, convenient and people felt safer on less congested roads and riding while special traffic reduction measures were in place. Bicycle use was encouraged and enabled through government policy, the creation of dedicated and safe cycle lanes, and a range of financial incentives that made getting in the saddle not only the healthiest and easiest option, but the most profitable. Most importantly though, the bicycle gave people freedom during a time of restrictions, where they got to experience their towns and cities from a new, different perspective. Cycling as a means of transport offers benefits for health, pollution reduction and wellbeing, allowing people to enjoy their surroundings more directly and to feel better connected to nature and to their wider community.

REFERENCES

1. Bloomberg
https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-09/japan-and-france-find-public-transit-seems-safe

2. Transit
https://transitapp.com/coronavirus

3. The Exploratorium
https://www.exploratorium.edu/cycling/frames1.html#:~:text=German%2520Inventor%2520Karl%2520von%2520Drais,frame%2520was%2520a%2520wooden%2520beam.

4. The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jul/07/halfords-predicts-bicycle-boom-to-continue-for-2020

5. The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/jun/17/halfords-reports-184-jump-in-profits-amid-global-bike-shortage

6. People For Bikes
https://www.peopleforbikes.org/news/how-bicycling-changed-during-a-pandemic

7. Cyclist
https://www.cyclist.co.uk/news/8285/cycling-has-increased-by-200-since-lockdown-government-reports

8. Cyclist
https://www.cyclist.co.uk/news/8285/cycling-has-increased-by-200-since-lockdown-government-reports

9. Cycling Industry News
https://cyclingindustry.news/study-shows-huge-value-of-covid-era-cycling-infrastructure-investment/

10. World Bank Blogs
https://blogs.worldbank.org/transport/covid-19-creates-new-momentum-cycling-and-walking-we-cant-let-it-go-waste

11. European Cyclists' Federation
https://ecf.com/dashboard

12. European Cyclists' Federation
https://ecf.com/dashboard

13. Smart Cities World
https://www.smartcitiesworld.net/news/news/bogota-expands-bike-lanes-overnight-to-curb-coronavirus-spread-5127

14. The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/oakland-california-slow-streets-coronavirus-us

15. The Guardian
https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/23/low-traffic-schemes-halve-number-of-road-injuries-study-shows

16. GOV.uk
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906698/walking-and-cycling-statistics-england-2019.pdf

17. GOV.uk
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906698/walking-and-cycling-statistics-england-2019.pdf

18. Singletrack World
https://singletrackworld.com/2020/03/bike-shops-classed-as-essential-service-may-remain-open/

19. Crowdfunder
https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/wheelsforheroes?experiment=a

20. Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/communitybikeworkshop

21. WHO
https://www.who.int/health-topics/air-pollution#tab=tab_1

22. BBC News
https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-52483684

23. Electrek
https://electrek.co/2021/04/14/france-3000-e-bike-credit-to-trade-in-old-gas-car/

24. Governo Italiano
https://www.mit.gov.it/comunicazione/news/sostenibilita-fino-500-euro-per-buono-mobilita

25. Bicycle Association
https://www.bicycleassociation.org.uk/news-press/e-bike-incentives-over-twice-as-effective-as-e-car-grants/

Re-set

lessons from lockdown

This guide has been made possible by the support of ClimateWorks Foundation – climateworks.org – and is published by the Rapid Transition Alliance – rapidtransition.org – where you can find many of these examples explored in more detail.

rapidtransition.org

@RapidTransition

Rapid Transition Alliance

climateworks FOUNDATION