

2016 Bicycle Safety Focus Group Final Report

HSA staff conducted focus groups with teens and young adults in Santa Cruz County to gather their opinions about bicycle safety with an emphasis on helmet use. One focus group took place in mid-County at Cabrillo College in Aptos. The other occurred in South County at Pajaro Valley High School. A total of 29 people participated, 15 between the ages of 14 and 18, and 14 between the ages of 19 and 33.

Participant Recruitment

HSA staff sent inquiries to local youth organizations and collaborative agencies to assess their interest in hosting a group. Once sites were identified, we developed a bilingual recruitment flyer for hosting sites to distribute. To compensate participants for their time, we offered a free bike helmet, lock or bike light. Schools also had the option of giving participants community service hours for their participation. Drinks and snacks were provided.

Focus Group Process

Each focus group was facilitated by two HSA staff members. The groups followed a semi-structured questionnaire format, which allows participant interest to determine follow-up questions. The agenda included introductions, ground rules, an anonymous question activity and discussion. The high school group focused on helmet use and included viewing and discussing two helmet safety videos.

Results

High school students reported rarely wearing a bicycle or skateboard helmet, while the college students reported doing so more often. Reasons youth did not wear a helmet included:

- cost (“expensive” or “too expensive”)
- discomfort (“I don’t like the way they feel”)
- appearance (“It’s very idealistic to say that looks don’t matter”)
- peer pressure/lack of social norms (“Nobody else is wearing a helmet”)
- misconceptions about human physiology (“I have a skull as protection”)
- misconceptions about bicycle safety (“You don’t have to wear a helmet if you ride a cruiser”)

Among the college group, those who had been in a crash were more likely to wear a helmet (“I fell without a helmet once and that was not good”). As a group, they were more aware of their personal risk while cycling (“I wear a helmet because I could die without it”). They were also cognizant of being role models for younger cyclists (“Sets a good example to young kids”). Participants in both groups often mistakenly base their decision to wear a helmet on conditions of a particular ride – where they are, the amount of traffic, how far they are going, and what type of bike they ride (road bike, mountain bike or cruiser).

The high school students, who were primarily Latino, spoke about the lack of social norms and negative cultural stigma in their community around bicycling. They felt that the greater community linked cycling to low socioeconomic status and even criminal behavior. Comments included: “It’s for kids or people with DUIs or homeless people or people with low income,” “Why [are] you on a bike? Don’t you have enough money for a car?” “There’s no bike culture here,” and “Maybe second generation Hispanics will go back to riding a bike.”

Participants reported lots of unpredictable behavior by motor vehicle drivers, such as not looking before they open car doors, not looking before they exit driveways, turning in front of cyclists and driving too close to cyclists. Several cyclists admitted to their own unpredictable behavior, including not stopping at stop signs, weaving around pedestrians and “just acting like the laws of traffic don’t apply.” As with helmets, the cyclists seem to decide whether or not to follow the law based on each individual situation. As one participant said, “To stop and then go again is so much harder on a bike. That’s why I don’t follow the rules all the time.”

Members of both groups agreed that infrastructure improvements would encourage more cycling. The high school students were told about the possibility of a new bike and pedestrian bridge near their school. About half the group said that it would make a difference in whether or not they rode their bike to school, which currently feels risky (“I don’t feel like it’s safe right here,” “Everybody speeds,” “The cars coming off the highway ramp, nobody ever yields”). The college group agreed that the number and condition of bike lanes in Santa Cruz County are inadequate and advocated for more buffered or protected lanes.

Participants also shared their favorite reasons to bike. Answers included fun, exercise, transportation, enjoying the outdoors, and helping the environment. Several participants mentioned the mental health benefits of cycling to relieve stress and “express some emotions.” As one student said, “If you feel angry you can ride a bike and you come back an hour later and you feel better.”

On the evaluation, participants described the focus groups as “fun,” “interesting,” “informational,” “inclusive” and “inspiring.” Participants suggested that future groups include more local statistics about cycling accidents and injuries. They also requested more helmet examples and more videos.

These results suggest the following broad programmatic efforts:

- Work with families, community groups and partner agencies to create a stronger culture of cycling in South County beginning in the elementary school years.
- Start “upstream” with children and families to create an expectation of helmet use.
- Emphasize responsibility of older cyclists as role models for youth.
- Continue to advocate for improved bicycling infrastructure throughout the county.
- Helmet education should reinforce the necessity for a helmet regardless of the type of bike, length of ride, or location of ride.
- Continue to educate drivers on how their behavior impacts cyclists.
- Focus on positive aspects of cycling for youth such as fun, exercise and the environment.
- Continue to gather primary data from diverse demographic groups.