

Crashes Involving Bicyclists

Documentation of internal police research into crashes on
Berlin's sidepaths

Published by the Grüne Radler Berlin [Berlin Green Bicyclists]



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Foreword by the Grüne Radler Berlin

The documentation published here is a survey of bicycle crashes in Berlin from 1981 through 1985, compiled by the Berlin police chief. For the first time, the effects of the sidepaths built in Berlin over the past few years were investigated. The study was completed in the spring of 1987, but it vanished into the filing cabinets of the Senator for Traffic and Industry. As the Senate has as of yet refused to publish the study, the Grüne Radler have decided to place it before an interested public in its original form. The silence of the Senate is no accident, because the results reveal a faulty, in fact dangerous policy in planning for traffic.

The myth of safe sidepaths

520 km of sidepaths have been built in recent years. The hopes for a more bicycle-friendly Berlin that were at first linked to them were very soon dashed. Instead, bicyclists had to report that the sidepaths are largely unusable, and that the authorities do nothing to make them so (no removal of parked cars or snow, no adequate safety measures at construction sites etc.), and that the design and location of the sidepaths worsens rather than improves bicycle travel conditions. Red stripes painted on the sidewalks, too little width, poor pavement, impossible twists and turns, very soon made it clear to everyday bicyclists that these were **bicyclist-impeding paths**, which had the purpose of merely getting bicyclists off the streets. The Berlin sidepaths became, over time, the main complaint of bicyclists in this city. For years, bicyclists' organizations tried to convince city agencies and the Senate of the need for a change, but without any success. Today, the same type of deficient sidepaths is built as was built several years ago.

So, only the anticipated safety advantage remained as an argument for the use and the construction of these sidepaths. But this, too, revealed itself quickly to be an illusion. Experienced bicyclists who had ridden for years without having a crash became aware quickly, through the accumulation of crashes on and because of sidepaths, that the opposite result was being achieved. Pedestrians and motorists who had only started riding in recent years, or who only occasionally rode bicycles, were not as well able to judge, because they lacked the experience to make a comparison. They often confused the subjective feeling of safety with objective safety. But, with increasing experience, it became ever clearer that the sidepaths are dangerous -- more dangerous than riding in the roadway. There is a simple reason for this: the design and location of the sidepaths conflict with the most important principle of traffic safety, the slogan:

Visibility is safety.

The Senator for Traffic and Industry had always disputed the danger and disregarded the bicyclists' experience. As recently as May, 1986, Senator Wronski explained in a press release that the risk of crashes on sidepaths is "about 16% less than when using the

II

roadway." The basis for this statement was at first unknown, until in the fall of 1986 Bundestag member Klinski, in a brief inquiry about bicycle traffic, asked this question, among others: "On the basis of what statistically grounded analysis does the Senate come to the conclusion that sidepaths reduce the risk of crashes in every case?" Wronski's answer was that there was no such research, that there never had been any (provincial press service, October 21, 1986). With this, he admitted that all statements related to this claim were simply fabricated, and at best represented wishful thinking.

At the same time, Wronski mentioned a study to be conducted by the police, which was to be completed by the end of 1986. After some delay, the study was ready in the spring of 1987, but it was only distributed internally to the Senate. For the people who had assigned the task, the results must have been very frightening, as these were neither published nor subjected to any form of commentary.

In September, after six months of silence by the Senate, the Grüne Radler decided to place the study before the public and to release extracts of it to the press. This action was supposed to press the Senate to take a stand. The Senate took none.

The first startled reaction to questions from the press was that the study was intentionally withheld; attempts were made to dismiss it with statements such as that it was outdated, was not yet complete, was intended only for internal planning use in the Senate -- and similar dances on eggshells. Since then, again silence. The personal spokesperson of the Senator for traffic, Heinrich, announced a forthcoming discussion with bicyclists' organizations, "including the Grüne Radler" to the Morgenpost newspaper. On inquiring about this, the Grüne Radler first were invited to a meeting at a time which had already passed, and then on inquiring for the third time, there was no proposal for a talk. The study was never placed before professional reviewers. Even city officials in charge of construction apparently have no knowledge of it.

On the 17th of November, the Senate decided on a new plan for bicycle traffic. Result: construction would be accelerated. The sidepath network would be almost doubled in size over the next ten years. Wronski once again based this decision on the claimed safety of the sidepaths.

It can be assumed that the Senate will keep quiet about this study from this time forward, and will never publish it. For that reason, there also will be no update study. Those facts make this into an important document. The Grüne Radler Berlin ask all organizations which are interested in or responsible for traffic policy -- advocacy organizations, clubs/associations and political parties, to look into the results of this study, and to help so that consequences may be drawn from it, and the discrimination against bicyclists and endangering of them may be brought to an end.

Four-times greater risk

The police chief's study is based only on data from police crash statistics. Above all, there was no traffic counting, no information about traffic volume, travel distance etc. Despite the lack of all of these, statistical analysis nonetheless confirms the daily experience of bicyclists.

(In the text of the report, the author's astonishment as to what the computer is entering into the tables can sometimes be detected).

The trend in streets with and without sidepaths is exactly opposite during the time period under observation. When motorists notice bicyclists better, then the bicyclists ride more safely. That is shown by the positive trend in reduced severity of crashes in streets without sidepaths (table 47). In streets with sidepaths, as table 32 shows, the situation is precisely opposite. The main reason for this is the hidden location of the sidepaths. At junctions (four-way intersections and entryways), motorists are surprised by the sudden appearance of bicyclists, especially fast ones. A comparison of tables 48-49 with tables 33/34 shows clearly how the crashes are concentrated especially strongly in streets with sidepaths, and with a rising trend, while the trend in streets without sidepaths even shows a decrease.

Categorization by individual characteristics paints the same picture. Thus, the **severity** of crashes on streets with sidepaths is higher, and shows an increasing trend (Tables 32/47). The issue with **crashes involving trucks**, which lead a large percentage of fatalities, proves to be especially alarming. Tables 44 and 49 show that serious crashes are heavily concentrated at intersections in streets with sidepaths.

The categorization by districts (tables 61-72) gives the same result. The twelve-fold repetition of the same results (page 55), should allow of no remaining doubt.

The results in tables 29 and 30 are clearest: the comparison of crashes per km on the two types of streets shows that there were exactly four times (!) as many on streets with sidepaths in 1985. And the trend is rising...

Unfortunately, there is no correlation of age groups with the presence or absence of a sidepath. It stands to reason that people who trust the supposed safety of such paths (children) are especially in danger on them.

The author's explanation of the tables is objective except in Section 5.2, where an interpretation is attempted; this deserves a brief comment. The author states that "It can also be seen that the number of crashes per km of sidepaths is greater, the shorter the sidepath network in a given district." (page 59). This appears to be an argument for more sidepaths. But, looking at the situation more precisely, the bluff can be seen: the different sizes of the districts, and the total lengths of their streets, are not taken into consideration. The list which follows, ordered in order of crash density, points to more crashes per km of sidepath in the small, inner-city districts with high traffic volume (Kreuzberg, Tiergarten,

Charlottenburg, Schöneberg) than in the larger outer districts with light traffic and a long street network with fewer intersections (Zehlendorf, Reinickendorf, Neukölln, Spandau). No statistical study is necessary to prove that few crashes occur where there is little motor traffic.

Nothing learned

The Senator has up to now avoided any official commentary on the study, though one argument nonetheless could be heard: sidepaths, so it goes, attract bicycle traffic. That should explain the increase in the number of crashes. Now, it is not a very legitimate to bring the neglected traffic counts into the discussion, but still, let us look at an earlier study. The Senate's 1983 "Wiege-Bericht" [prioritization report] established that sidepaths do attract bicycle traffic, but at most by 25% more compared with the previous condition on the same street without a sidepath. This naturally can not explain the 300% increase in the crash rate.

Also, even a superficial look at parallel streets would not tend to strengthen this argument. One might, for example, compare the Bismarkstraße in Charlottenburg (sidepath) with the Kantstraße (no sidepath), or the Alt-Moabit with the Turmstraße.

In fact, bicyclists try to avoid the loud, heavily-traveled main streets, and to travel longer distances on quiet secondary streets, if these are not made unusable by cul-de-sacs, cobblestones, one-way sections etc. It is even more annoying when such almost-ideal sections of streets are eliminated by the construction of sidepaths. So, for example, this very year, a sidepath was constructed along the Württembergische Straße. This was a wide, well-paved, quiet street, an important north-south link for bicyclists. But it was transformed into a congested street adjacent to which, between parked cars, trees and pedestrians, passes a narrow sidepath with bumpy tile pavement, and which doubtless, within the next few months, will shamefully disappear under a blanket of snow. There are many similar examples.

Sidepaths worsen behavior in traffic

Instead of measures which improve the mutual attention which all travelers pay to one another, and which promote alternatives to automotive travel, the opposite is achieved with the construction of sidepaths and the goal of separating the different types of traffic.

Motorists might have finally become used to bicyclists again, since the end of the 1970s, but instead, the streets are indirectly set aside for motor traffic only, and the thrill of speed can be enjoyed. It is no wonder that motorists of weak moral character feel themselves entitled to try to force bicyclists who nonetheless ride in the streets to leave them, with horn blasts, dangerous close passes etc. In the past two years, more and more bicyclists have been complaining about such coercion, which is not infrequently accompanied by scolding, insults and actual attacks, or which lead to serious crashes. The progression

from: "please ride on the sidepath" to "get off the street" reveals the cause of this escalation.

In this way, separated from moving traffic and walled in on the sidewalk, bicyclists get into more conflicts with pedestrians. In addition to the mutual endangerment, the narrowness encourages lack of attention. A fast bicycle is a road vehicle and does not belong among pedestrians!

The behavior of bicyclists as well (most of whom were pedestrians or motorists a short time before) also can hardly be improved in this way. People who daily are informed that bicyclists are not to be taken seriously as road users behave accordingly when they are sitting on a bicycle.

Eliminate the mandatory-use rule

A pivotal issue in this entire problem is §2 of the traffic law, which requires bicyclists to use sidepaths if they are available. Without parallel requirements for the quality and usability of these paths, this amounts in reality to a prohibition against use of the streets for which bicyclists' organizations successfully campaigned 100 years ago. If the mandatory use requirement, which exists in this form for no other group of road users, is legally questionable, then also, in the context of this slow and dangerous sidepath network, it represents discrimination. The authors of the traffic laws certainly did not intend this.

Good, safe bicycle paths will be used willingly. A mandatory use requirement is therefore unnecessary. To force bicyclists to use provably dangerous paths against their better judgment might be seen as conflicting with the fundamental right to personal integrity. It is high time that judges -- who are almost without exception motorists -- inform themselves about this situation. For this reason as well, the publication of this study is urgently needed.

We do not need to wait until the traffic law is changed. It would be sufficient to redesignate the Berlin sidepaths. Designating them as pedestrian paths with the supplementary sign "Radfahrer frei" (open to bicyclists) would be sufficient as an initial step. This would, to be sure, not make such paths safer, but it would allow the everyday bicyclists to use the streets, and would not prohibit the less-confident bicyclists, recreational riders, beginners -- all those who stop at more or less every intersection -- to use these paths while being cautious about pedestrians. These paths also make sense as places for people pushing baby strollers, and for wheelchair users.

It has been pressing for a long time, however, to implement the means which are known to produce bicycle facilities which are genuinely safe, which promote bicycle use, and which in that way reduce motor traffic. Pedestrians and motorists also would be served by this development.

Demands of the Grüne Radler

In agreement with other bicyclists' organizations, the Grüne Radler demand that the Senate:

Immediately stop building planned sidepaths

Abolish the mandatory-use requirement on existing sidepaths in the short term by posting the sign "*Radfahrer frei*," and in the longer term through changes in the law. The fundamental right to physical integrity must also apply to bicyclists, and when necessary, must take precedence over the traffic law. (In June, 1987, the European Cyclists' Federation opposed the introduction of a European Community-wide mandatory-use rule.)

Establish an informational program along with the provincial traffic police, making bicyclists as well as motorists aware of the hazards of the sidepaths. Such a program also should help to avoid the heated conflicts with motorists (horn-blowing, pushing aside), which are increasingly occurring when bicyclists do not use the sidepaths and which pose a new hazard for bicyclists.

Plan bicycle facilities from now on only with the approval and involvement of bicyclists' organizations. The Grüne Radler demand that bike lanes be installed (on the roadway to the **left** of the parking lane, entirely within the sight of motorists) on busy streets, that bicycle routes **without sidepaths** be developed on lightly-traveled roads for travel between urban centers, and also that appropriate greenways be incorporated in the bicycle facilities network. (A greenway plan has languished for years in the Senate's filing cabinets).

Introduce a 30-km/hr speed limit area-wide (with few exceptions). This speed limit makes special bicycle facilities and the separation of the different types of traffic superfluous.

The Grüne Radler Berlin are a citizens' advocacy group composed of everyday bicyclists, which is especially concerned with promotion and safety of bicycle use. On request, we will gladly send more detailed information. We are thankful for the active cooperation and collaboration of other organizations, as well as for the donations on which we depend.

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**RECOMMENDED LITERATURE AND MATERIALS
ON THE SUBJECT OF
SAFETY FOR BICYCLISTS and
BICYCLE FACILITIES**

Crash research:

- "Verkehrsunfälle mit Radfahrern" [Crashes Involving Bicyclists], produced by the Chief of Police of Berlin, Platz der Luftbrücke 6, 1000 Berlin 42. The research report with commentary is available from the GRÜNE RADLER BERLIN. The topic of the research is: trends in bicycle crashes in Berlin from 1981-1985. Emphasis: safety of sidepaths.
- "Auswertung für Radverkehrsunfällen in Hannover 1985" [Analysis of bicycle crashes in Hannover, 1985]. Produced by the Fahrradwerkstatt Glocksee e.V., Brüderstraße 2, 3000 Hannover 1. 34 pages for 10.- DM, available at that location. Analysis of all crashes with 60 individual factors, and conclusions applicable to planning.
- "Bereichsweise Unfalldatenauswertung zur Fortschreibung der Radwegplanung der Landeshauptstadt München" [Analysis of crash data by neighborhood for the updating of bikeway planning for the provincial capitol city of Munich]. Research by: TU München, produced by the Planungsreferat München, Blumenstraße 31, 8000 München 2. May be purchased there for DM 10.- Special topic: safety of sidepaths.

Overview: Bicycling politics, safety and bicycle facilities

- "Informationsdienst Verkehr" [Traffic information service], a circular produced by advocacy organizations, produced by AK Verkehr und Umwelt. A subscription may be obtained by sending 20.- DM to the Jochen Richard special account, 51 Aachen, BLZ 370 100 50, Pga KIn 1587 18 - 503. Sidepath discussions , II and III from the IDV # 21, 23 and 25 may also be obtained as photocopies from AK Verkehr, Kirchstraße 4, 1000 Berlin 21 - - Telephone: 030/ 392 61 46 (also for other inquiries).

Bicycle facilities

- "Pro Fahrrad" [In Favor of Bicycling], from Schäfer-Breede et al, 1986, in the Bauverlag Reihe Velo [Construction publishers bicycling series] (Wiesbaden and Berlin). Available from booksellers for 64.- DM. Picture book with many -- unconventional -- solutions for a bicycling infrastructure.
- "Stadtverkehr im Wandel" [Urban traffic undergoing change] Brochure from the Bundesminister für Raumordnung, Bauwesen und Städtebau [Federal Minister for zoning, construction and urban planning], Deichmannsaue, 5400 Bonn 2, gratis. Examples of planning for traffic calming, pedestrian and bicycle facilities.
- "Tempo 30 in Städten und Dörfern" [30 km/hr speed limits in cities and towns] and "Neue Stichworte und Fakten zum Stadtverkehr" [New issues and facts concerning urban traffic] as well as "Prinzipielle Verkehrsberuhigung" [Traffic-calming concepts], are pamphlets produced by AK Verkehr which discuss bicycling as part as an overview. Address, as above: Kirchstraße 4, 1000 Berlin 21

[the photo below, which was on the last page of the original printed publication, illustrates the Grüne Radler's recommendation for a sign assembly specifying optional use of sidepaths --JSA]

