

Essential Evidence on a page: 23 Mass community cycling events

Adrian Davis 28/05/09

Top line: While the public health evidence base as to the effectiveness of mass cycle rides is limited in this study participants who were novice riders or first time participants significantly increased their number of bicycle rides in the month after the event.

Participation in mass physical activity events may be a novel approach for encouraging inactive or low active adults to trial an active behaviour. Bowles and colleagues took a sample of men and women aged 16 years and older (n = 918) who registered online for a mass cycling event in Sydney, Australia.¹ Participants reported cycling ability and number of times they rode a bicycle during the month before the event. One month after the event they completed an online follow-up questionnaire and reported cycling ability, lifestyle physical activity, and number of times they rode a bicycle during the following month.

Participants in the cycling event were predominantly male (72%), 83% rated themselves as competent or regular cyclists, and 68% rated themselves as more active than others of the same sex and age. Half of the survey respondents that rated their cycling ability as low before the event subsequently rated themselves as high one month after the event. Respondents with low pre-event self-rated cycling ability reported an average 4 sessions of bicycle riding the month before the event and an average 6.8 sessions of bicycle riding a month after the event. This increase in average sessions of bicycle riding was statistically significant. Similarly, first-time participants in this particular cycling event significantly increased average sessions of cycling from 7.2 pre-event to 8.9 sessions one month after the event.

The results that novice riders or first time participants significantly increased their number of bicycle rides in the month after the event is encouraging. Further knowledge about the public health applicability of mass events is needed, and methods for attracting less active and novice individuals to participate remain to be developed. Follow-up surveys are also needed over a longer time period in order to assess whether increased cycling levels in the short terms are maintained over longer time-spans.

Despite such study limitations, mass events have the potential to encourage participants to trial new behaviours in a non-competitive, controlled, and enjoyable environment, as well as have a broader agenda setting role across the community. Other mass participation events have demonstrated the potential to attract inactive adults or adults with little cycling experience, such as single-day health promotion events to encourage physically active commuting instead of motor vehicle use. For example, participation in a Victoria Ride to Work Day more than doubled since 2002, and attracted over 5,000 participants in 2005, approximately a fifth of whom were first time riders. Other structured health promotion events also seem to have the potential to increase walking for transport.²

¹ Bowles, H., Rissel, C., Bauman, A. 2006 Mass community cycling events: Who participates and is their behaviour influenced by participation? *International Journal of Behavioural Nutrition and Physical Activity*, 3: 39 <http://www.ijbnpa.org/content/pdf/1479-5868-3-39.pdf> (open access)

² Merom, D., Miller, Y., Lymer, S., Bauman, A. 2005 Effect of Australia's Walk to Work Day campaign on adults' active commuting behaviour. *American Journal of Health Promotion*, 19:159-162.