**Article of the Week**

**Directions:**

1. **Show evidence of a close reading (highlighting key points and making notes in the margins – can be questions, thoughts, confusion, etc.)**
2. **Answer the question at the bottom of the article in paragraph form.**

# Rob Breakenridge: Forget helmets. How about mandatory body armour for cyclists?

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[Rob Breakenridge, National Post](http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/author/natpost/) | 13/09/13 10:31 AM ET  
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* [Pinterest](http://pinterest.com/pin/create/button/?url=http%3A%2F%2Ffullcomment.nationalpost.com%2F2013%2F09%2F13%2Frob-breakenridge-forget-helmets-how-about-mandatory-body-armour-for-cyclists%2F%20rel=)
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A new [study](http://www.calgaryherald.com/news/calgary/More+safety+gear+urged+cyclists/8890672/story.html) from researchers in Calgary plays into a growing sense that riding a bike is a rather treacherous activity, one not to be undertaken without ample protection.

Researchers at the Foothills Medical Centre examined 14 years of injury data involving street bikers and mountain bikers. Their findings have been published in the Canadian Journal of Surgery.

The researchers conclude that our current bicycle safety message is insufficient. It’s not enough to be pushing helmets, as is commonplace today. No, we need to take bicycle safety to a whole new risk-averse level: body armour.

This is based on their findings which details injuries other than head injuries suffered by cyclists. But that’s the sort of twisted hindsight employed by the if-it-will-save-one-life crowd: that we can keep adding rules on top of rules until we’ve eliminated any possible risk.

The reality, of course, is that we cannot eliminate all risks and it would be foolish to try.

And where does it all end? First it was helmets. Now it’s chest protectors. What about arms? Legs? With faces unprotected, eyes and noses are vulnerable. How far do we go in trying to eliminate every possible injury scenario?

By all means, if you feel the need to gear up like a linebacker before hitting the bike trails, then that’s your prerogative. You could add training wheels (front and back) to your bike and keep your speed under 5km/h. With all that, you’ve made it very unlikely that you’ll suffer a debilitating injury. Congratulations.

I can appreciate there is greater risk involved for, say, bike couriers who spent the day dodging traffic on busy streets. Or mountain bikers who barrel down steep and uneven dirt trails. It would be reckless to not consider some protection.  But just because some types of cycling are risky does not mean all cycling is.

At least these researchers – for now – are not calling for mandatory body armour. They are certainly in favour of mandatory helmets, though. Senior author Dr. Chad Ball stated that “When you look at [regions] that have legislation that mandates helmets, their head injury rate goes down substantially. We don’t have that in Alberta so our level of debilitating head injury persists”.

But that’s simply not true.

A study earlier this year from the University of Toronto confirms that helmet laws have a very limited impact – or none at all – when it comes to head injuries. That [study](http://www.bmj.com/content/346/bmj.f2674), published in the British Medical Journal, found no statistical link between helmet laws and hospital admissions for head injuries.

Furthermore, even if the benefits of wearing a helmet are obvious, wearing one may create a false sense of security, and lead to more risk-taking. There are [studies](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/21418079) [pointing](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1369847812000587) to the existence of this sort of risk-compensation, and we may compound that problem by pushing body armour.

The other unintended consequence of these dire warnings is that we discourage people from cycling, which, ironically, makes it more dangerous. There is safety in numbers, a trend the lead author of the [University of Toronto study](http://www.calgaryherald.com/health/evidence+cycle+helmet+laws+reduce+head+injuries+study/8388121/story.html) believes has helped cut down on injuries.

But surely the notion of large numbers of cyclists riding around without helmets and body armour must keep these nanny-statists up at night. Wouldn’t such scenario mean unbridled carnage? The answer to that question can be found in the Netherlands.

Nearly [a third of Dutch citizens](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/flash/fl_312_en.pdf) use a bicycle as their primary method of transportation, far higher than any other European country. It’s probably the [safest](http://www.cyclehelmets.org/1259.html) country to ride a bike, too. And [virtually no one](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304248704575574250616160146.html) wears a helmet (I’ll go out on a limb and assume the same is true for body armour). A recent [BBC profile](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23587916) of the Dutch fondness for cycling noted that “if you see someone wearing a cycling helmet … chances are they’re a tourist or a professional”.

Clearly, cycling is not so uniquely dangerous that the state needs to step in and protect consenting adults from themselves. To put it in perspective, we see thousands of injuries each year from [climbing ladders](http://www.canada.com/story.html?id=9e17da6b-d3aa-4ad1-a9f4-f73b059132ee) for example. Even [being a pedestrian](http://www.cihi.ca/cihi-ext-portal/internet/en/document/types+of+care/specialized+services/trauma+and+injuries/stats_ntr_hosp_cause_aug09) seems more dangerous than riding a bike.

Should we mandate helmets and body armour for those hanging Christmas lights or for pedestrians navigating a busy downtown core?

Cycling, like so many other things in life, entails some risks. This crusade to eliminate them all is getting silly.

National Post

**Response Question (answer in paragraph form and staple to this sheet): After reading the article, do you believe that bicycling protection is necessary?**