

**BICYCLE
NETWORK®**

Mandatory helmet law public survey summary

November 2017



1. Executive summary

In September 2017 Australia's biggest bike riding organisation, [Bicycle Network](#), conducted a survey of public attitudes towards Australia's mandatory bicycle helmet laws. The survey received 19,327 responses.

The respondents are from across Australia (2.6% from overseas) and are people who ride bikes with varying regularity (only 1.9% of respondents never ride a bike).

The key results from the survey are as follows:

- 41.7% believe bicycle helmets should be mandatory at all times, in all scenarios (currently the law in Australia, excluding NT)
- the strongest supporters of mandatory helmet laws are Victorians, Tasmanians, baby boomers, women, those who've had a serious crash and Bicycle Network members
- the weakest support for mandatory helmets comes from Queenslanders, millennials, those who ride once or a few times a year and non-Bicycle Network members
- 40.7% believe bicycle helmets should only be mandatory when they assess the risk to be high, for example, when racing, on road or for young people.

If helmets weren't mandatory:

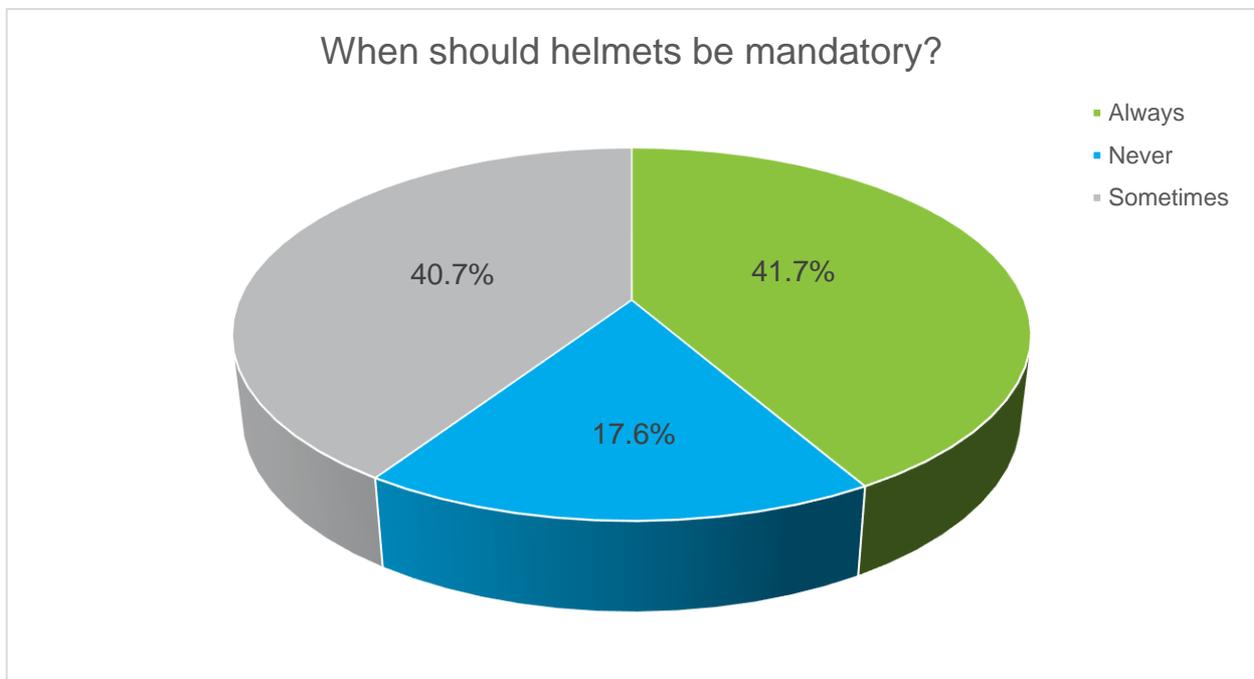
- only 3.7% more people would never wear a bicycle helmet but 34.3% less would always wear a helmet when riding a bike
- those most likely to continue to always wear a bicycle helmet are those who most strongly support current mandatory helmet laws (Victorians, women, baby boomers, those who ride once or a few times a week, those who've crashed and Bicycle Network members)
- those least likely to continue always wearing a helmet are those who don't support the law as strongly (Queenslanders, South Australians, millennials, those who ride once or a few times a year and non-Bicycle Network members)
- 30.4% would ride more if helmets weren't mandatory with the biggest number of people who would ride more being Queenslanders, millennials and infrequent riders.

The public survey is one part of Bicycle Network's [helmet policy review](#) which also includes gathering expert opinion and a literature review. The goal of the review is to determine Bicycle Network's public policy position on Australia's mandatory helmet laws.

The following report is a summary of the key results of the survey.

2. Opinion is divided, but only 41.7% believe bicycle helmets should be mandatory at all times

41.7% of survey respondents believe Australia's current mandatory helmet laws should remain as they currently stand, leaving nearly two-thirds of respondents believing it should change. 17.6% of respondents believe that bicycle helmets should never be mandatory and 40.7% believe that helmets should only be mandatory in certain circumstances.



The strongest supporters of mandatory helmet laws are:

- from Australia's southern states - 51.2% of respondents from Victoria and 51.8% of respondents from Tasmania are in favour
- baby boomers (61+ years old) - 56.2% are in favour
- women - 53.3% are in favour
- those who've been hospitalised from a bike crash - 60.1% are in favour
- Bicycle Network members - 61.1% are in favour

The weakest support for mandatory helmets is from:

- Australia's north - 31.2% of Queenslanders
- millennials (19-30 years old) - 31.5%
- those who ride once or a few times a year - 33.3%
- non-Bicycle Network members - 33.7%



Some of the key reasons put forward for helmets remaining mandatory at all times are:

“Brains are important. Helmets stop brains getting smashed when accidents happen. Wearing a helmet cannot amount to a greater inconvenience than the consequences of brain injury.”

“The helmet isn't much protection but at least it's something and any protection is better than none. If anything I would like to see stronger legislation around the quality of the mandated helmet that must be worn to make it more protective.”

“Safety is number one. We've got a great law in Victoria already, don't start to undermine it with making wearing a helmet optional. Just make everyone wear a helmet for their safety and we can all (especially women) just accept we will have helmet hair. Safety is a priority.”

“Motorcycle helmets and car seatbelts are other examples of essential safety precautions. I suffered head injuries from a serious bike fall when I was ten years old. I was lucky to survive. I wish I had a helmet in 1958.....”

“My taxes pay for the injuries of these idiots and it doesn't take many head injuries requiring lifetime care to fully compensate for saved hospitalisations of a few heart attacks from having more people cycle.”

“Have experienced an accident in which I was the only one involved. Landed on my helmet which cracked. Better the helmet than my skull.”

Some of the key reasons put forward for helmets never being mandatory are:

“I love the idea of cruising around bike tracks happily shooting off to parks and cafes. I feel more people would do this if the helmet law was revised, especially teenagers.”

“Acute injury is still far less than chronic disease from lack of exercise & cycling provides great opportunity to be active when the distance is too far to walk, but still accessible actively.”

“The countries with the highest bicycle usage, and the lowest relatives bicycle related injuries do not enforce the use of a bicycle helmet.”

“Having to wear a helmet discourages me from riding. I usually get a lift in a friend's car whenever I can.”

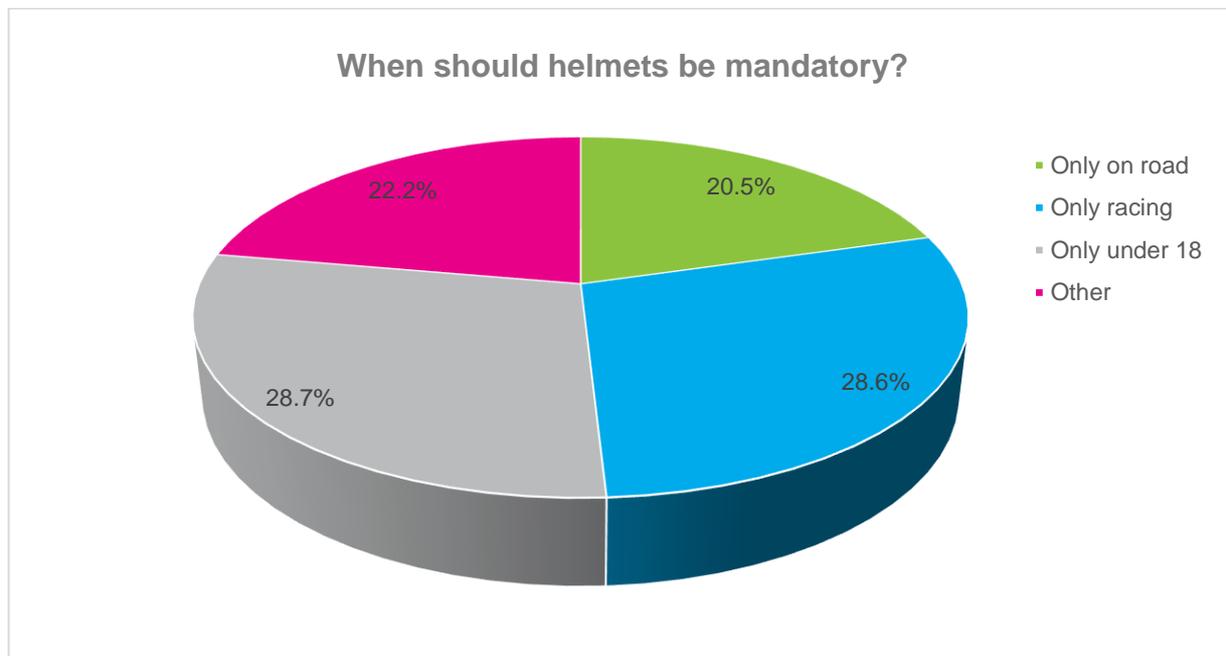
“Helmets damage the creation of a cycling culture like northern Europe by creating an unwarranted perception of danger.”

“The helmet law is a failed policy. It doesn't meet the pub test for starters: if it's such a good law, why haven't more countries adopted it like they adopted our pioneering seatbelt laws?”

“I should be allowed to choose whether I wear a helmet according to the risk of the road conditions, be it a city road or a country trail. Why am I treated like a child with this ridiculous law? I hardly ride at all because of it: I can't abide the constraints of a helmet on what ought to be a liberating and open-air experience. No thanks to you and legislators for nannying me through my life.”

3. 40.7% believe helmets should only be mandatory when they assess the risk as high

For those who believe that bicycle helmets should only be mandatory some of the time, the specific circumstances are where the respondent believes there is a greater risk. In this case, risk is being assessed according to the riding environment, the age of the person riding the bike and the type of riding.



Respondents were also given the option of ‘other’, which elicited a significant number of variations where bicycle helmets should be mandatory, should the current law change.

These alternative situations included:

- under 16 years of age
- on roads with speed limits greater than 50km/h
- when the rider is going at a certain speed like 20km/h



- when the rider is under 18 years of age and on the road

Some of the reasons put forward for why bicycle helmets should be mandatory only in specific circumstances, as opposed to all the time included:

“Riding on the road generally incur higher speeds and present higher risk. I think for riders using bike trails there could be an exemption of using a helmet. This certainly would encourage people to get outside for fun and recreation.”

“The biggest risk to cyclists is cars. If riding on a bike path, it should not be compulsory as being so discourages many people from biking.”

“Cycling isn't dangerous, though the perception is that because you're wearing a helmet it is dangerous. Most countries in the world don't have mandatory helmet laws. I said to the ages of 16 because I think adults become very upset when there is a perceived danger to children.”

“If I'm riding my road bike in a group I will wear a helmet. If I'm riding slowly up to the shops or work in the morning I shouldn't have to wear a helmet.”

“I agree with Mandatory Helmet Law when riding on roads, and interacting with motorised traffic. But if I am riding on a low-speed, shared path seperated from motorised traffic I have not on occasion worn my helmet. Just riding at 15km/h along the beach etc.”

4. If helmets weren't mandatory, almost as many riders would still wear helmets, but not always

If Australia's helmet laws were changed to a situation where helmets were no longer mandatory, the number of people who never wear a helmet when riding would only increase by 3.7%. However, the number of people who always wear a helmet when riding would fall by 34.3%.

According to the survey, current bicycle helmet compliance is strong throughout Australia, sitting at 83.4%. It's strongest in Victoria at 91% and weakest in WA at 70%. In the NT, where it's not mandatory for adults to wear a helmet off road, 55.9% always wear a helmet.

If wearing a bicycle helmet was no longer mandatory, the following types of people are the most likely to continue to wear a helmet every time they ride a bike:

- Victorians - 57.9%
- women - 57.4%
- baby boomers - 62.5%
- those who ride once or a few times a week - 55.8%



- those who've crashed (61.2%) and those who've been hospitalised as the result of a crash (70.3%)
- Bicycle Network members 70.4%

If helmets were no longer mandatory, the following types of people are the most likely to wear a helmet less:

- Queenslanders 38.2% and South Australians 39.1%
- millennials 38.9%
- those who ride once or a few times a year 35%
- non-Bicycle Network members 40.3%

A number of people indicated in the survey that they would choose not to wear a helmet in situations where they've personally assessed the risk to be low. The following are a selection of explanations.

"I would choose to wear a helmet based on the risk I may be exposed to."

"When riding in situations where I felt it was warranted."

"Always, with the exception of a cruise along the beach front or a ride down my quiet street to the local store (ie. low risk situations)."

"I would wear a helmet in higher risk situations, like busy roads or sport."

"Yes for daily commute, no for slow pedal along the water with my wife."

"I'd still wear it on main roads, but probably not when nipping up to the local corner shop. Most of the time (including nearly always on the road and always when in "lycra-mode" -- but short trips it would be great to have the option of just riding down to the shops or locally, on the footpath if necessary (i.e. no dedicated bike path)."

"Most of the time I would wear one, just not when I pedal to the shops, or to the beach etc."

"Always with the only exception being my sand bike riding on the beach."

"Would generally wear a helmet but might choose not to if riding on shared paths or quiet back roads."

"I would wear when commuting but may use bike share schemes without a helmet."

"When riding a share bike."

"When intending to ride at speeds greater than 20km/h."



5. If helmets weren't mandatory, 30.4% would ride more

If bicycle helmets weren't mandatory, 30.4% of survey respondents said they would ride more. Alternatively, only 0.91% reported that they would ride less.

The greatest increase in riding would come from:

- Queenslanders 40.6%
- millennials 40.1%
- those who ride once or a few times a year 52.3%
- those who ride once or a few times a month 39.4%.

In explaining their reasoning for why they would ride more, many people talked about increasing opportunities for short, casual and impromptu trips by bicycle.

The following are some of the comments:

"Just cruising to mates' places or dinner, I'd probably ride down the street or to appointments where I needed to be well presented."

"I would be more inclined to ride my bike for pleasure as well as for logistical transport reasons. I would be more adventurous with my routes and riding on weekends and holidays."

"I live near great bike tracks and just want a leisurely ride in the fresh air."

"There are some sort journeys that I do not currently take with a bicycle, either because they are short or because having to carry a helmet with me at my destination means I forego cycling and use other methods of transportation."

"No helmet would lower the barrier to riding my bike. I would be able to consider my bike my primary mode of transport."

"I would probably do more short trips by bike as it would be more convenient, e.g. riding to the shops. I would also use more bike share for getting around the city - for example if I was in the CBD on the weekend and didn't want to get a tram."

"Absolutely. More multi modal commutes without looking over for police exercising undue diligence for something that doesn't improve cycling safety."