

Bike blog



Bike hire schemes may save lives, researchers say

A study on the Barcelona bike hire scheme suggests averted carbon emissions saves 12 lives each year



A cycle hire docking station beside the Thames in London. Photograph: Anthony Devlin/PA

London's bike hire scheme has many benefits, some widely acknowledged, others less so. But could it be saving lives by decreasing air pollution?

Researchers studying the Barcelona bike hire scheme – known as Bicing – found that the cyclists had helped to avert 9,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide pollution, which they believe has saved more than 12 lives each year the scheme has operated.

The Spanish-led research team found that for those using the Bicing scheme there was an estimated 0.03 extra cyclists' deaths each year from traffic accidents and an extra 0.13 cyclists' deaths from air pollution compared with an overall saving of 12.48 lives through the benefits of physical activity. This study did not provide a calculation for the lives saved in the non-cycling population but it stands to reason that they would also benefit from the improved air quality.

Research team member Mark J Nieuwenhuijsen said: "We did the study because we wanted to know the health effect of an active transportation policy like bike sharing. 350-400 cities around the world now have bike sharing schemes. Most of them were set up to reduce congestion, but we wanted to look at the other benefits, in particular to find out if there were public health benefits."

London is one of the most polluted places in Europe. A study commissioned by Boris Johnson found that the capital's poor air quality causes 4,300 deaths every year. City officials have been warned by the European commission to clean up the city's act and the city faces fines of up to £300m a year if it fails to do so.

Across the UK the story is much the same - a parliamentary committee found that air pollution causes 50,000 early deaths each year. John Vidal reported:

According to the environment audit committee, minute sooty particles, emitted largely from the burning of diesel and other fuels and inhaled

deeply into the lungs, shortens lives by seven to eight months. In pollution hotspots like areas of central London and other cities, the particles could be cutting vulnerable people's lives short by as much as nine years.

"

But Simon Birkett, founder and director of [Clean Air in London](#), pointed out that bike hire schemes alone won't solve London's smog problem: "Boris's bikes are fun but, to put them in perspective, even 6,000 bikes would do little to offset the 30,000 extra vehicles a day expected in the western extension of the congestion charging zone that he cancelled. With the biggest public health crisis since the great smog of 1952, London needs fewer and cleaner vehicles not buckets of greenwash from the current mayor."

[Previous](#)

[Blog home](#)

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2011