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Bike rental schemes 'saving lives in cities'

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Bicycle rental schemes save lives by increasing physical activity levels among city dwellers and should be expanded across Britain's cities, according to research in the British Medical Journal. A study of the Barcelona equivalent of London's "Boris bikes" found that short, regular cycle rides by users have reduced the number of annual deaths – despite the increased risk from accidents and exposure to air pollution.

The increase in cycling also reduced greenhouse gases as fewer people travelled by car, the study found.

Low-price urban bike rental schemes are increasingly popular in countries as far-flung as France, China and Canada. The trend has largely been motivated by a desire to reduce traffic congestion.

The Spanish study analysed the health impact of the Barcelona scheme by comparing cycling with driving. It found that 12 deaths were avoided every year as a result of the benefits of increased physical activity, which decreases the risk of obesity, stroke and heart disease. Barcelona was one of the first cities to introduce the scheme, in 2007, and has more than 180,000 regular users.

In London, there are 128,000 registered users of the scheme, who on average cycle for 16 minutes per weekday journey. The main motivations are speed, exercise and saving money, according to research by Nicolina van der Merwe at the Environmental Change Institute, University of Oxford. Her research suggests people have taken up cycling in London in place of the Tube and bus, rather than cars.

The Barcelona study is the first to demonstrate the positive health benefits to individuals as the result of a cycling scheme. It adds support to a 2009 Lancet analysis which found the potential for huge public-health benefits if more people walked and cycled to get around cities instead of driving.

Dr James Woodcock, from the UKCRC Centre for Diet and Activity Research, who conducted the Lancet study, said: "Short, regular cycling trips provide health benefits to individuals and society, so people should be encouraged to get out of cabs and cars."

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