

# SHARING the road

## How motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians can safely make use of our streets and roads

BY PETER BOHR



It seemed so hard-hearted. In February 2006, a Los Angeles policeman ticketed an 82-year-old woman—loaded down with groceries and using a cane, no less—for walking too slowly across a busy street. The plight of Mayvis Coyle, a Sunland resident, caused quite a brouhaha among senior-citizen advocates, not to mention pedestrians everywhere, after the story made national newscasts and blogs.

The LAPD insisted the ticketing officer acted out of a concern for Coyle's welfare rather than a mean spirit. As Captain Ronald E. Marbrey, commander of the LAPD's Valley Traffic Division, said at the time, "We've had nine people killed this year to date, pedestrians in the San Fernando Valley—seven of them 55 years of age or older. Out of the nine killed, in seven cases the pedestrian was at fault."

### Potential for Conflict

When motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians compete for the same section of roadway, conflicts and collisions are bound to occur. Anyone who's walked or bicycled Southern California's streets and roads can cite instances of near misses with impatient or distracted drivers, perhaps cutting them off in crosswalks or bike lanes.

But pedestrians frequently jaywalk, bicyclists often ride on the wrong side of the road and ignore stop signs and traffic signals, and joggers hooked to iPods can be oblivious to the traffic around them. And in pedestrian/vehicle collisions, someone walking under the influence of alcohol or other drugs is more common than you might suppose: In fatal car-pedestrian collisions in the U.S. between 1997 and 2007, in 35 percent of the cases, pedestrians had a blood-alcohol concentration of .08 or higher.

### A Shared Responsibility

Two things are clear. First, pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorists all have the right to use the roadways. Second, all groups share a responsibility to follow the rules of the road—state and local laws require it, and common courtesy demands it. In order for all to coexist safely, there also needs to be mutual respect among motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians.

What can be done to reduce the risk among all road users? Improving road safety has focused on three often-overlapping strategies: education, engineering, and enforcement.

Education involves efforts to increase the knowledge and awareness, heighten the sense of personal responsibility, and change the behavior of drivers, pedestrians, and cyclists through such measures as:

- Conducting safety campaigns in schools, churches, libraries, and community organizations.
- Publicizing new laws.
- Offering classes in bicycle safety and sharing the road.

# Safety Tips For...

- Holding neighborhood and community meetings, programs, and forums targeting problems specific to certain higher-risk groups, such as schoolchildren, seniors, or immigrant groups who might not be familiar with traffic-safety laws and procedures.

Engineering involves changes that alter the physical environment—streets, roads, intersections, and so on—that make the interactions of cars, bicyclists, and pedestrians safer. Examples include:

- Installation of “countdown” signals at traffic lights, which let pedestrians know exactly when a traffic light will change.
- Improved traffic signs in high-risk areas.
- “Sharrows,” painted sections on a street or road that indicate areas that can be shared by bicycles and vehicles.
- “Complete street” policies to make streets safer and more user-friendly for pedestrians, bicyclists, and motorists.
- Widening of narrow rural roads, some of the most crash-prone in the nation.

Enforcement means making sure that motorists, pedestrians, and bicyclists obey laws. Examples include:

- Adequate on-street presence of law enforcement.
- Temporary installation of speed trailers, which let motorists know how fast they’re going and attempt to slow down traffic.
- Sting operations in which police patrol high-risk areas, issuing warnings or tickets to law violators.

## Encouraging Trends

Overall, drivers, bicyclists, and pedestrians in California seem to be getting the message. According to California Highway Patrol (CHP) data, deaths and injuries from both vehicle-pedestrian and vehicle-bicyclist collisions have declined significantly in the state in recent years. For example, between

## CYCLISTS

**Obey all traffic laws**, including stopping at red lights and stop signs and yielding to pedestrians.

**Ride with motor vehicle traffic**, on the right side of the road.

**Maintain a straight line**; ride predictably; and avoid swerving between parked cars.

**Use hand signals** to indicate stops, turns, and changes of direction to motorists and pedestrians.

**Allow faster traffic** to pass when it’s safe; avoid needlessly blocking the road.

**Pay attention to parked cars**. Drivers may pull out in front of you or open a door in your path.

**As you approach intersections**, be aware of cars behind, beside, and in front of you who may try to cross your path. “Left crosses” are the most frequent motorist-caused bike crashes; “right hooks” rank second.

**When riding with others**, ride single file to allow motorists to overtake you safely.

**Wear a bicycle helmet**. (California law requires helmet use for riders under age 18.)

**When riding at dusk or after dark**, use appropriate lights and reflective gear, both to make yourself conspicuous and to see better.

## PEDESTRIANS

**Walk on the sidewalk**; when a sidewalk is unavailable, walk on the left-hand side of the road, facing traffic.

**Obey traffic signals**. When crossing the street at a traffic signal, walk only with a green light, allowing yourself enough time to cross the street before the light turns red.

**Keep moving**. Walk as quickly as is safely possible to the other side of the street. Never stop in the middle of the crosswalk.

**Make yourself visible in low-light conditions and at night**—wear light-colored clothing or athletic clothing with reflective patches, and carry a flashlight.

**Before you cross a street**, allow enough room for oncoming traffic to stop safely. “Pedestrians have the right-of-way” is not a license to cross a street wherever or whenever you want.

## MOTORISTS

**Slow down when encountering bicyclists or pedestrians**.

**Yield to pedestrians** at intersections—whether or not there is a marked crosswalk.

**Give bicyclists extra room**—three feet if possible—when passing them on the roadway. Otherwise, stay behind them until it’s safe to pass.

**Allow bicyclists the appropriate right-of-way**; for example, at a four-way stop or when they are turning left.

**When making a left turn**, be aware of the possible presence and speed of oncoming cyclists.

**When parked on the side of a street**, look for passing bicyclists before opening your car door.

**Watch for cyclists and pedestrians** before exiting a parking space or driveway.

**Avoid using your car’s horn** near bicyclists or pedestrians.

**Don’t expect child cyclists and pedestrians** to know traffic laws or to behave predictably.

## INTERNET SITES

**AAA.com/roadahead**  
State, regional, and national transportation issues

**AAAfoundation.org/home**  
AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety

**Bicyclela.org**  
L.A. City Department of Transportation bicycle information

**Bikecommuters.com**  
Issues related to riding a bike to work

**Bikeleague.org**  
League of American Bicyclists

**Bikewalk.org**  
National Center for Bicycling & Walking

**Cabobike.org** California Association of Bicycling Organizations

**Calbike.org**  
California Bicycle Coalition

**Dmv.ca.gov/hq/tpp/offices/bike/safety/html**  
California DMV website page on bicycle rules and safety

**Pedbikeinfo.org**  
Promotes safe cycling and walking

**Youtube.com/watch?v=jdrxlPQpt4**  
NHTSA video on bicycle safety

## BROCHURES

The following are available through the Auto Club, in English or Spanish, at Auto Club branches or by calling (800) 541-5552.

**Between the Lines**, about pedestrian safety (also available in Cambodian, Chinese, Korean, Russian, and Vietnamese)

### **Bicycle Laws**

#### **California Pedestrian Laws**

*California Bicycling Street Smarts: Riding Confidently, Legally, and Safely*, a 48-page booklet, may be ordered while supplies last for \$2 each, including postage, from the California Association of Bicycling Organizations. Please make checks payable to CABO-Street Smarts, and send to CABO-Street Smarts, 3335 N. Mountain View Drive, San Diego, CA 92116-1738. E-mail [cabobike@cabobike.org](mailto:cabobike@cabobike.org) for information about bulk orders.

#### **Getting Children to School Safely**

#### **Pedestrian Safety Rules**

#### **Ten Tips for Drivers**

#### **Walk Safe**

## AUTO CLUB INVOLVEMENT

The Auto Club is actively involved in education, policy, and engineering efforts to promote safe interaction among motorists, cyclists, and pedestrians, including:

**Providing** educational material promoting bicyclists' safety, and encouraging bicyclists to wear helmets.

**Reminding** all road users to follow the rules of the road.

**Supporting** inclusion of pedestrian and bicycle facilities in transportation-improvement projects.

**Advocating** for adequate and effective traffic safety laws and enforcement.

**Encouraging** adequate crossing protection, such as school crossing guards and improved signs, signals, and markings at crosswalks.

**Conducting** back-to-school educational campaigns targeting motorists, pedestrians, and bicyclists.

**Creating** educational campaigns promoting the safety of motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians, with special emphasis on protecting school-age and senior pedestrians.



1987 and 2007, the most recent year for which data are available, combined pedestrian deaths and injuries declined 23 percent, and combined bicyclist deaths and injuries fell 35 percent.

“Comprehensive initiatives that target all road users—educational-awareness campaigns, building additional bike paths, improving the safety of pedestrians crossing roads, and enforcing the rules of the road—have made an important difference in saving lives,” says Anita Lorz Villagrana, manager of community affairs and traffic safety at the Auto Club.

That’s the good news. The bad news is that in California, pedestrians still account for a higher proportion of all traffic fatalities than the national average. Likewise, bicyclist fatalities are considerably higher in California than in the rest of the country. So more work to make our streets and roadways safer remains to be done.

*Veteran automotive journalist Peter Bohr writes Westways’ DriveSmart column.*