The Dutch cycle twice as much as Germans in Winter

Differences in mobility culture in Germany and in the Netherlands influence bicycle usage / Published in the Journal of Transport Geography

The Dutch use their bicycles around twice as often as their German neighbours in the winter months. Generally, bicycles are used more often in the Netherlands than in Germany. In the summer (June to August) the Dutch use their bicycles for 23.0 percent of their journeys – in Germany only 16.7 percent. The Dutch also use their bicycles in the winter (December to February) for 20.5 percent of their journeys. On the other hand, the Germans only use their bicycles for 10.3 percent of their journeys.

Therefore, the seasonal differences in bicycle usage in the Netherlands are much less than those in Germany. This is shown by a study carried out by the sociologist Dr Ansgar Hudde from the Institute of Sociology and Social Psychology of the University of Cologne. Hudde explains the differences in cycling are due to different mobility cultures in both countries. The study was published under the title ‘It’s the mobility culture, stupid! Winter conditions strongly reduce bicycle usage in German cities, but not in Dutch ones’ in the Journal of Transport Geography.

Since the climate conditions for cycling in the Netherlands and Germany are similar, this does not explain the differences in bicycle usage. “The joint analysis of behavioural and climate data shows: We in Germany are more sensitive to cold and darkness. The fact that the Dutch tend to cycle all year round and Germans only do so in the summer has little to do with the different climate, but rather with the different mobility cultures”, Dr Hudde explains. There is a cycling culture in Germany that reflects and encourages such seasonal patterns. This is also illustrated for example by the German term ‘Fahrradsaison’, which translates to ‘cycling season’ and indicates that there is a season in which one rides their bicycle, but which also means that there is a season where one does not cycle. “Even biking events like ‘cycling in the city’ or ‘cycling to work’ only take place in the summer”, Hudde continues. “They send out a signal that cycling is for the summer and not for the winter”.

In his study, Ansgar Hudde evaluated representative statistical data on mobility in Germany and in the Netherlands. Data from 335,000 trips made by 98,000 people from 263 medium and large towns were evaluated. The mobility data were linked to city-specific climate data and analysed jointly. Due to the large discrepancies between bicycle usage in towns and in the countryside, the statistical evaluation was confined to medium and large towns (more than 50,000 inhabitants).

The results of the study are important for the discussion about sustainable mobility policies. If more people were to cycle in the autumn and winter, emissions of CO2 and fine particles would be reduced and traffic jams or congestion caused by public transport could also be avoided. “Imagine you were stuck in a traffic jam in your car in the winter, and saw relatively empty cycle paths. You would most likely be twice as annoyed about car lanes being turned into cycle paths”, Hudde asserts. If the cycle paths are well used throughout the year, then this will lead to greater support for pro-cycling policies. Better bicycle usage in the winter can be achieved, for example, by improving the infrastructure and path lighting. In addition, bicycle events that occur in the winter could also contribute to cycling becoming more
popular in the colder months in Germany. Hudde sums up: “The Netherlands shows that when it comes to the topic of year-round cycling, there is huge potential for a better traffic situation and more sustainability.”

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Cyclist in December 2022 on the way between Uniwiese (green) and Cafeteria Zülpicher Strasse in Cologne
Niclas Carl