

SAFETY

More than half of young B.C. cyclists report always wearing helmet

KEVIN GRIFFIN

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More programs aimed at educating young students about the benefits of wearing bike helmets would help convince a greater number of youngsters to wear them, says a safety educator.

Scout Gray, bike education program manager for cycling coalition HUB, said whenever one of its bike safety courses is taught to middle school and high school students in Metro Vancouver, there is a much higher percentage of students who report wearing helmets afterwards.

"Getting out and educating is really important — with youth and with all people," she said.

Statistics Canada numbers released Wednesday show when B.C. cyclists between 12 and 17 were asked about helmet use, 56.8 per cent said they always wear a helmet; another 18.7 per cent said they wear one most of the time.

Only Prince Edward Island had higher helmet use. A total of 61.1 per cent of young cyclists in P.E.I. said they always wore a helmet; 12.6 per cent said most of the time. Among all provinces and territories, Quebec had the most youths who said they never wore a helmet at 41.5 per cent; in B.C., only 12.4 per cent of young cyclists said they never wore a helmet.

Both B.C. and P.E.I. have laws requiring cyclists to wear helmets.

Gray said she was sure part of the reason for the higher helmet usage in B.C. is because of the provincial law.

"In terms of getting helmet usage higher, it requires education and encouragement and support and really showing them why they should care and why they might want to wear a helmet," she said.

Last year, HUB's bike education program reached 6,948 students aged 11 to 15 in 37 schools in Metro Vancouver. Programs ranged from two hours over two days for younger students to five hours over five days for older students.

Another 5,392 students in 189 schools throughout B.C. took part in the annual Bike To School Week program.

Gray said one barrier to helmet use among teenagers is the way it is perceived among peer groups. "I think better-designed helmets are going a long way to make them cooler," she said. "Skate-style helmets are definitely more popular among high school students than racing-style helmets. The more casual and social it looks, the more appeal it has."

According to Statistics Canada, across the country, older teens aged 18 to 19 were the biggest risk-takers, with only 20.6 per cent saying they always wear a helmet. Data on helmet usage is from the 2013-14 Canadian Community Health Survey.

kevingriffin@vancouversun.com

with file from Bethany Lindsay