

# Unequal cycling boom: Bicycles are increasingly turning into status symbols

January 10 2022

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In 2018, city dwellers in Germany with a high level of education (Abitur) cycled 70 minutes per week on average, twice as much as in 1996. For residents of less urban areas without Abitur, however, hardly anything changed over this period. City dwellers with high education now cycle three times as long as those living in rural areas with lower

education.

Sociologist Dr. Ansgar Hudde at the University of Cologne's Institute for Sociology and Social Psychology (ISS) explored the connection between bicycle mobility and [educational level](#), evaluating more than 800,000 journeys made by more than 55,000 respondents. The data comes from the German Mobility Panel (MOP) and the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) for the years 1996 to 2018, as well as the BMVI study "Mobility in Germany 2017." His findings are summarized in two articles published in the *Journal of Transport Geography*.

The sociologist attributes a large part of the cycling boom to rising education levels. "The data show a strong correlation between bicycle mobility and education level," said Hudde. "There are more and more people with higher education, and they are increasingly cycling. Both trends are currently continuing steadily." With regard to [city dwellers](#), Dr. Ansgar Hudde also studied why people with a higher degree of education use bicycles more often than people with lower education levels. One partial explanation is that people with a college degree are somewhat more likely to live in bicycle-friendly cities and neighborhoods.

However, thorough statistical analysis of the data made it clear that educational differences are also evident within cities and neighborhoods. "Individuals with a college degree are nearly 50 per cent more likely to use bicycles than those without a [college degree](#), holding factors such as age, gender, and place of residence constant in the analysis. Overall, the results clearly indicate that it is the educational level itself that leads to more bicycling," Hudde said.

Therefore, Hudde explored the question of why the level of education influences whether and how much people cycle. Previous research has shown that people do not choose their means of transport only according to cost or travel time. Rather, they also choose it according to what it

symbolizes and what message it sends to third parties. An expensive car can express a lot of wealth and professional success, but little health or environmental awareness. "With the bicycle, it's exactly the opposite. People with higher educational qualifications usually do not run the risk of being perceived as poor or professionally unsuccessful—even if they are on the road with an inexpensive bike. Rather, they can gain status by cycling if they show themselves to be modern, health-conscious, and environmentally aware," Hudde explained. "In contrast, [people](#) with a lower level of [education](#) might be more likely to use an expensive car as a status symbol to show that they have 'made it'."

The findings have far-reaching social implications. People with lower [education levels](#) are more likely to have less financial resources and, on average, poorer health. As an inexpensive and healthy means of transportation, cycling could mitigate such inequalities—but the opposite is true today. Many cities are promoting cycling and redistributing road space from cars to bikes. At the moment, however, these measures primarily benefit the more highly educated. Dr. Ansgar Hudde sums up, "If policymakers succeed in making [cycling](#) attractive to all, it will mean more livable cities, better health, more environmental protection, and less social inequality."

**More information:** Ansgar Hudde, The unequal cycling boom in Germany, *Journal of Transport Geography* (2021). [DOI: 10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2021.103244](#)

Provided by University of Cologne

Citation: Unequal cycling boom: Bicycles are increasingly turning into status symbols (2022, January 10) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2022-01-unequal-boom-bicycles-increasingly-status.html>

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