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Transcript

Speaker 1

It's time for the Outspoken Cyclist, your weekly conversation about bicycles, cyclists, trails, travel, advocacy, the bike industry, and much, much more. You can subscribe to our weekly podcast at outspokencyclist.com or through your favorite podcasting app to listen anytime. Now here's your host, Diane Jenks.

Speaker 2

Hello and welcome to the Outspoken Cyclist. I'm your host, Diane Jenks. Thanks for tuning in today. This is the second in our series about safety. And while it isn't a long conversation, it's an important one because it helps to set the context for how safety trends are playing out. My guest is Raul Avelar. He's the senior research transportation engineer for the IIHS, Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. Raul's area of work is a focus on bike pad safety, and that fits right into our series here. One of the things Raul says not too far into our conversation that piqued my interest is about the difference in behavior between men and women when they're riding and even walking, that men seem to be more aggressive and less likely to follow the rules when it comes to traffic safety. As Rachel Maney said in our conversation from last time, there's also the difference that seems to be experienced by those who are kitted up like cyclists in flashy jerseys, helmets, and cycling footwear, and recreational cyclists, perhaps in a T-shirt, cargo shorts, and sneakers. Raul's research seems to confirm those experiences. Then there's the issue of whether new features in today's cars work. Warnings such as those that keep you in line and automatic braking. According to Raul, these features do work. So why would someone not activate them in their new car? Ah, yes, humans. Here's our conversation. Welcome to the Outspoken Cyclist. Thanks for being my guest today. How are you?

Speaker 3

I'm great. Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Speaker 2

Where are you?

Speaker 3

I am in Arlington, Virginia.

Speaker 2

Oh, so we are on the same time zone. Somehow I thought that that wasn't the case. Awesome. How's Arlington today? Is it raining down there?

Speaker 3

It is kind of cool today, so I'm glad to see that. I opened my window in the morning and had my coffee with a little bit of the cool.

Speaker 2

Us too. We're up here in Cleveland, so we're in the same kind of weather pattern. So I'd like to get a little bit of background about you and the work you're doing at the IIHS. I came across this article that you wrote, and I thought it was excellent. And I want to share it with people. This conversation is part of a series that we're doing on safety, which seems to be a really huge problem right now, and cycling. So give me a little bit of your background.

Speaker 3

Yeah, so I came to the US to study in transportation engineering in 2007. I've been in Oregon, I've been in Texas, now in Virginia. And Road safety has been basically what I've been doing for the best part of the last two decades. I joined IHS in 2023 and part of the research program, I've been focusing on infrastructure safety. You may know us for vehicle safety, which is probably the main things that we do, but we have a few of us who focus on infrastructure and within that, We include pedestrians, bicyclists, motor vehicles, whoever uses the infrastructure out there, we're trying to find ways to make them safer.

Speaker 2

Well, and we certainly have an infrastructure problem right now. All of the money seems to be heading for roads and bridges, and I'm sure that that's creating some problems for the work that you're doing. So you're doing some work on pedestrian and cyclist deaths due to car crashes. And, you know, we've had a couple of really high profile deaths in last week, a woman in Boston, a woman in Texas. Tell us what you're seeing and what these numbers are actually, I mean, it looked like they were falling at one point, but it looks like they're accelerating again.

Speaker 3

Yeah, so pedestrian and bicycle safety is always hard to study compared to motor vehicles because you have way fewer crashes and then you have if you want to focus it to the infrastructure part, there's actually fewer that happen in the piece of infrastructure you're trying to research. So it's always a little bit of a challenge to be in the same. I would say level of certainty as we do for motor vehicles and higher facilities, freeways and highways. But so that's the challenge with doing that. The way that we do our

research then is not necessarily always focusing on crashes because of that limitation, but we also go and look for behavior, like what people are doing around the facilities and what can we learn from that behavior and to improve it and to make things safer. To the other part of your question about the trends, I took a look at those numbers and the latest that we have in our website at 2024, just using that as the latest point that I can talk about, that we are for sure, the trends have been going down, as you mentioned, and continue to, I think, in the early numbers that were released for 2025. But that doesn't mean that things are great. Like, those numbers, represent what is the outcome of the work that has been done before those years, if you hear me. And the things that are happening right now are probably going to be reflected in future years, fatality trends, right? But yeah, the numbers have been going down, which is great because there's been a lot of things that have been done in several jurisdictions around the country. And now that's started to have a dent on those numbers. And hopefully the reason things that you're mentioning are not going to affect negatively that trend, but it's likely that things are going to change if you don't put money into the things that are saving lives, probably Those lives are not going to get saved.

Speaker 2

I want to talk a little bit about behavior, because I think that that's where a lot of the problems come in. We have the behavior of people behind the wheel of the car, distracted, impaired, angry. And then we have the behavior of cyclists who I think try to be deferential on the road, but often aren't. And so what we hear now is, I'm no longer going to ride on the road. It's too dangerous, which is affecting the entire bicycle industry. And of course, it's affecting the people who are riding who are then involved in these crashes. So what can you tell me about behavior that you've been studying?

Speaker 3

Yes, interesting that you mentioned behavior. My first project here in IHS was on pedestrian and driver behavior around crossings. And it's very interesting to see, trying to study them in the wild, right? Basically put some cameras out there and record what they're doing and then watch the video and see what can we learn from that, right? And for example, in the study that I'm referring to, we did some selection of sites in North Carolina, and then we put the cameras and locations that had beacons in the crossings. So you would expect pedestrians to press the button and then the drivers to yield. In an ideal world, that's 100% each of those, right? But this is not the ideal world. Some pedestrians just go across because there's no cars or they perceive that it's not going to be too dangerous. Some drivers don't care and just continue going. So it's interesting. It's, you know, when you have humans making decisions, it's It's always some challenge to try to convince people to do the things that they're supposed to be doing. And so we ask questions as well, like, do you know how you're supposed to behave around, do you know if you're supposed to press the button, you know what happens when you press the button? And anyway, behavior is key, right? And you were talking about pedestrians, you were talking about bicyclists. And looking at the stats, you see an overwhelming

number of fatalities of bicyclists are male compared to female. What do you think is that? I would ever expect maybe males are a little more aggressive when riding than females. And probably behavior is the underlying cost there, but the stats are staggeringly different.

Speaker 2

Let me reintroduce you and then I want to talk a little bit about some of the engineering options that are coming up. We're speaking with Raul Avelar. He is a researcher at IIHS and I never can remember what the, you're the senior research transportation engineer. So it's the Institute for Highway Safety.

Speaker 3

Insurance, Insurance Institute.

Speaker 2

Oh, that's right. There's insurance involved, which is another big, another big issue. But we won't even, I don't even think we're going to cover insurance today. So are you seeing solutions to the traffic engineering crash avoidance features coming from new cars? So I know some new cars have these warnings like, okay, you're over the line and the car beeps or whatever, or it brakes automatically. Are these options helping and are they going to become standard stuff in cars and do they work?

Speaker 3

Yes. Preliminarily, we can say yes, these features, when activated, they work, but not everybody has them activated. So some people find it annoying, the reminder, that they need to put on the seatbelt. So they try to, or in order to disconnect, I don't know if that you can disconnect, but there's some reminders that the vehicles nowadays bring that people can basically disable. And so if they're helpful, they probably used to be not tampering with that or use them as is. I know that there's some push to make them mandatory, but I'm aware, I'm not aware of that happening anytime soon, you know, in the land of the free, right? You don't want to. It's a political storm to try to get people to force people to do the best thing for them. But anyway, seat belts was a big fight and that happened and most people use seat belts these days. So hopefully this is something that is going to happen in the future. the features that you were referring to, emergency braking for pedestrians and bicyclists. One thing that I, looking at the data that I was surprised how good it is and how prominent it is also is the backup camera. You can basically avoid hitting somebody just by that simple device. Pretty much every vehicle has it now, right? So yeah, these things have some evidence behind them in their effectiveness.

Speaker 2

Oh yeah, my backup camera, I don't remember how it was without one. It's like, I've had this current car for almost 10 years. I'm like, how did I live without a backup camera? I

want to ask if you're doing any work with autonomous vehicles, vehicles that are going to be driving themselves. I don't think they're having 100% success with them avoiding everything like pedestrians and cyclists. So are you doing any research on autonomous vehicles?

Speaker 3

Myself, I'm not, but there's some people in the institute that are actually focused on that, working on looking at the particular features and some of the things that involve that world is not only the vehicle, but also the infrastructure around them. There's vehicle to vehicle communication approach to basically the vehicles know where they are around and they basically coordinate to avoid surprises. That's one way that automation is going. There's also vehicle to infrastructure. You have a signal that is basically broadcasting when it's going to change, how many seconds you have. And then the vehicle, the idea is that the vehicle would actually be able to determine, I have enough time to go or should I be stopping. Even detectors on the roads may actually give you a sense of there's bicycles or there's pedestrians. I saw a little demonstration in Detroit two months ago, that was very impressive, but that was a corridor that they had set up with all the technology, right? For that to be able to spread around the country, I don't know how long that's going to take, but that's another promise there, vehicle to network, vehicle to vehicle, vehicle to infrastructure. The automation part of it, currently I don't I'm pretty sure there's no real fully automated vehicle out there. It's some partial automation for particular conditions that is available. And it's sad that sometimes that's sold as an autopilot. And really it's not an autopilot. It's like within this condition. And you're still supposed to be watching out the road and ready to take over, right? That's a level 3 automation. But yeah, and there's promise in that, but I don't think we're there yet.

Speaker 2

I'm really interested in some of this technology. That sounds cool. But again, we're looking at putting all our money into roads and bridges and not enough into some other preventable possible infrastructure for the safety of riders. I mean, we're never going to be in Amsterdam. We're never going to be in Brussels. So it's just the reality is the US isn't really set up anymore to accommodate people in the road. So I think most of my listeners can agree that helmets can help prevent serious injury. Most of us do ride with them. What are you finding? I know you've done some pedestrian and cycling safety stuff. How do you think drivers perceive the rider with a helmet as opposed to without? Do you think that's an issue?

Speaker 3

Interesting. I'm not familiar with the latest research on the helmet particularly, but I do remember reading a paper, fascinating, a few years ago, that somebody tried to measure the distance between the driver and the rider. giving them some leeway, to go around the rides, the people who are riding. When the rider had a helmet, seems like that distance shortened, suggesting that the drivers may perceive, oh, this guy, I don't

know, it's safer to pass them closer, I guess, because if they fall, they're not going to die. But I wonder what further research happened after that. But definitely the the perception of the drivers and the riders and essentially of everything around you has an impact on your behavior. Going back to the pedestrian study I mentioned, yeah, when the facilities are such that it's really nice crosswalk, then there's a pedestrian island for the crossing, pedestrian, and all those things that are there gives good clues to the drivers and the pedestrians how they're supposed to be behaving. and they behave better. We actually measured the sites that had really good design, had better behavior, both for pedestrians and drivers. So I believe that, yes, what the perception gathers matters on the behavior that you're going to be observing.

Speaker 2

Yeah, there seems to be some agreement that riders who are wearing casual clothes and perhaps just enjoying a recreational ride are being treated differently than drivers who are riders who are kitted up with helmets and lycra and bright yellow stuff. So I just wondered if you had any background on that. So I do want to talk about the fact that all of this funding that was slated, 1.7 billion was just clawed back, is going to make a difference. I know you probably work with some planners. What's going to happen to all these plans that have suddenly been short-circuited, including like shovel-ready stuff that's like, okay, pick up your shovels. We're not doing this.

Speaker 3

Yeah, unfortunately, I don't have a good answer for you on that. I've seen this state of affairs and I'm sad to see that. It's going to be a challenge moving forward for sure. Bicycle lanes, for example, have been, study after study has shown that there's benefits, safety benefits measured in crash reductions. I've done some of that research myself in my past life before IIHS. And so yeah, it's sad to see that cherry picking countermeasures that have been shown to have effectiveness for whatever perceived threat. I don't know if it's a cultural threat or whatnot, but that sounds, very counterproductive, shooting ourselves on the foot, not selecting things that have been shown to improve safety. And so not only the funding situation you mentioned there, but also recently we found out that the set of proven safety countermeasures that FSWA has online have removed bicycle lanes and have removed variable speed limits from the toolbox of things that can be done to to improve safety. So it's kind of sad as well that not only the funding but the information available for people trying to improve safety is becoming less available for them.

Speaker 2

Yeah, they pulled all that stuff down from the website. And it's just, it's infuriating to people who are so dependent on drivers not being angry and impaired. So The last thing I want to talk about is something you're calling the 30 by 30 initiative. What is it and are you on track to make it happen?

Speaker 3

Thank you for bringing that. So yeah, 30 by 30 was an initiative from our president. The context of that is if you see the United States compared to peer countries in terms of rates of deaths, we're not looking too good. Everybody else is doing something else that we probably should be learning about. And you mentioned Amsterdam, some other places, but particularly for bicycle. But in general, There's been this big push by states and even cities to move to zero fatalities, not zero crashes, in the last decades. And very sadly, you don't see the progress as fast as you would wish. So this is kind of like a reset. Okay, let's look at an intermediate step. Let's not shoot for the sky first. Let's try to make first step. And looking at the fatality rate that can be reduced, let's try to shoot for 30% reduction by 2030, and that's the 20 by 30. And the idea there is basically to refocus on the things that are most effective, collaborate with others who are ultimately putting the countermeasures on the roads. Our role is to support those efforts, to provide information, to help implementation, but in the end, it's going to be jurisdictions like Arlington, Virginia, like Austin, Texas, who are going to be putting things on the road. And hopefully with our support to whatever extent that we can, we're going to start seeing those reductions. And are we on track? I'm not sure, but we're definitely doing our part and we know a lot of really motivated jurisdictions who are too.

Speaker 2

If you were to just wrap up kind of what we've been talking about and what the IIHS is involved in, what's next in your work right now that you're focusing on that will hopefully benefit vulnerable Rd. users.

Speaker 3

Yes. So most, I think all my projects actually, I just finished one that is not VRU or vulnerable Rd. users as you call them. Everything else that I'm working is basically VRU centric. And yeah, so basically we're trying to keep tabs and communication with people who approach us that they're planning to do something, they want support to something. And then we get involved if at all possible to produce research or at least to help the implementation. I'm working with a city in Washington state that they're doing some cool things with their signals for pedestrians and their timing, trying to help with evaluating the effectiveness of that. Working also, I think, I only have one city that is helping us, giving us some data to try to get those no cross on red. A lot of cities are doing that, but I haven't seen any research supporting what's the effectiveness of that, how much. So we're trying to help them quantify that. And yes, basically we have our lines of things that we're trying to research. Pedestrian bicyclist safety is 1 strong one. And we're basically trying to work with people who are trying to do things and helping them get their objectives, reducing crashes and fatalities.

Speaker 2

There are organizations and cities and towns that can contact you for that kind of help.

Speaker 3

Yes, yes.

Speaker 2

How would they do that?

Speaker 3

First, you can check out our website, ihs.org, and then there's a lot of resources there about the state of the knowledge about the things that we've been tracking, pedestrian, bicycle safety, vehicle safety, speed. And there's a contact under each of those topics. I'm the contact for speed and pedestrian and bicyclists. Happy to get your questions. And if you have some ideas or some evaluations that we can discuss, then definitely that's the way to start. And then we can see how much help you need and if our team is the best for that or we can get you in contact with others. In the end, what we want is things to get safer. Either we do it or somebody else, we'll be happy to help.

Speaker 2

Well, we have been speaking with Raul Avilar from the IIHS, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety. He's the senior research transportation engineer. It's iihs.org. Thank you so much for talking with me today. This fits right in with everything we've been working on and doing. to try and make it safer for cyclists and pedestrians. Thank you for your work, and thanks for talking with me.

Speaker 3

Thank you so much, Zian. You all have a good day.

Speaker 2

Thanks. My thanks to Raul Avelar for joining me on the show today. What he has given us is some details about what may be coming that should help us navigate an ever more crowded, speedy, and dangerous transportation world. as technology begins to connect roadways, signals, and cars. Perhaps our learning how those things work will give us more confidence to navigate roads more safely. While the research shows so much that can be done to make our roads safer, what is most disturbing to me is what seems to be the deliberate removal of that information from the public's view, putting cyclists and pedestrians in harm's way unnecessarily. For more information about the work the IIHS does and to contact Raul, log on to iihs.org. Next time, we'll be speaking with Chuck Marone from Strong Towns. Always an entertaining, smart, and informative guest, Chuck and I have an expansive conversation about how, when, and which branches of government should get involved with infrastructure and cities and more. My thanks to you for listening. For your information, this is the very first episode of the Outspoken Cyclist podcast that is not only available as an audio file, but we're testing the waters with video too. Raul has given me the permission to be the very first guest in

this format. You can find us on YouTube and I'd love to hear back from you with a thumbs up or a thumbs down to the idea. As always too, you can find photos, links, and a written transcript of the show at outspokencyclist.com. In addition to our YouTube channel, you can follow us on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, and Substack, where I not only share the podcast, but offer expanded commentary from time to time. I hope you are enjoying a fabulous summer. Please stay safe. Stay well and remember, there is always time for a ride. Bye-bye.

Speaker 1

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