

Cycling Research

HI HO, HI HO, IT'S OFF TO WORK WE GO...

In the last ChainLinks issue, we reported on Statistics NZ's call for comment on the questions for the 2006 Census - have a look at our website for CAN's final submission. The key Census question for cyclists is currently the "*main means of travel to work*"; some of you may recall early last year that we looked at the national statistics for this from the 2001 Census. This time we're going to look in a bit more detail at the cycling-to-work proportions, by district and compared with previous Census results.

The general trend in 2001 was *down* from the 1996 cycling levels. Indeed, Census cycling numbers in most places around New Zealand have been declining since a peak around 1981-1986. In 1981, 62,367 people biked to work (4.7% of travellers); by 1996 that was 50,811 (4.0%), and in 2001 it was 40,665 (3.1%). Here are the trends in the five main centres:

Urban Area	1981	1996	2001
Greater Auckland	2.1%	1.6%	1.2%
Hamilton	8.5%	6.0%	4.2%
Greater Wellington	1.8%	2.3%	2.3%
Christchurch	10.7%	8.0%	7.0%
Dunedin	2.8%	3.5%	3.0%

It's interesting to note that Wellington and Dunedin have bucked the trend somewhat, with later peaks. In fact, Wellington City was the only city council area to record an increase in cyclist numbers since 1996 (must be doing something right CAW!), a distinction also shared by Banks Peninsula and Mackenzie districts.

Note that the percentages given here are based on *the total number of journeys to work (i.e. not staying at home) where the travel mode is stated*. If you added in the "work-at-home/did-not-work/not-stated" numbers, the apparent cycling proportion would be even less (some publications appear to be using these lower values). This is hardly fair though (and doesn't help the cycling cause!), as there is no reason to suppose that these "miscellaneous" groups are any more or less likely to cycle on other occasions.

So where are New Zealand's "cycling cities"? Here are the top five "major urban areas" for travel-to-work cyclists in 2001 (with their 1981 % in parentheses):

- Palmerston North 7.5% (13.3%)
- Nelson 7.1% (8.8%)
- Christchurch 7.0% (10.7%)
- Wanganui 6.7% (11.7%)
- Gisborne 5.5% (13.7%)

While a lot of effort is currently underway to develop cycling strategies in most major urban areas, it is important to note however that many so-called "secondary urban areas" have greater proportions of cyclists travelling to work (usually without any special cycling facilities), including:

- Blenheim 7.9% (15.0%)
- Hawera 6.3% (6.5%)
- Ashburton 6.3% (15.4%)
- Masterton 6.0% (8.3%)
- Whakatane 5.8% (11.4%)

The above statistics are based on specially defined urban areas, not necessarily aligned with council boundaries. So which council wins the prize for the highest proportion of cyclists? Believe it or not (for the second Census running), it's Buller District centred around Westport, with 8.1%, followed by Nelson City (7.7%). Meanwhile, at the bottom of the heap are Porirua City (0.7%) and Rodney District at the top end of Auckland with just 0.6%...

So, do the downward trends spell doom and gloom? Well not necessarily. For a start, the last Census figures were over two years ago, and a lot of government cycling initiatives (and CAN activities!) have only been underway in the intervening period. It may be in many cases that the historic trends actually bottomed out *before* 2001. As an example, the latest analysis of cycle counts in Christchurch shows virtually static numbers over the last 4-5 years. And Christchurch residents' surveys show that the number of people who say they commute to work has been steadily increasing since 2000.

Although the travel-to-work question has the advantage over many other surveys of getting a full national picture, it is by no means perfect - have a look at our Census submission for more discussion on the issues and alternatives. One important thing to remember about it is that, according to other data sources (such as LTSA Travel Surveys), trips to and from work generally only comprise about **20%** of all personal trips. Therefore the figures provided here can only give some indication about the general amount of cycling in NZ. Education-based trips, for example, generally have a significantly greater proportion of cyclists.

Fortunately, a new initiative of the LTSA (under the 2010 Safety Strategy) is to undertake continuous "rolling" national travel surveys (the first batch have just been completed). These will be able to provide information on trips made for other non-work purposes too, e.g. education, shopping, recreation. Although the smaller sample sizes will limit the accuracy that can be placed at a local level, the surveys will enable a more up-to-date and broader snapshot of travel patterns to be available. Watch this space for more details...

If you would like to have a look at the Census cycling data in more detail for the whole country, you can download an Excel spreadsheet with all the information from CAN's website (look under the new "Research" section).

References

- Christchurch City Council 2003, Cycle Strategy for Christchurch City: Annual Report 2002/03, Jul 2003. Web: <http://www.ccc.govt.nz/recreation/cycling/>
- Statistics NZ Census 2001 website: <http://www.stats.govt.nz/census.htm>
- LTSA 1997/98 Travel Survey website: <http://www.ltsa.govt.nz/research/travel-survey/index.html>

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