

# Cycling Past 50: A Closer Look into the World of Older Cyclists

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## Faces

I see their faces as I ride

Just like mine

People of a certain age

Not interested in being any age

Only interested in being.

Some look like whippets riding fast on fast bikes

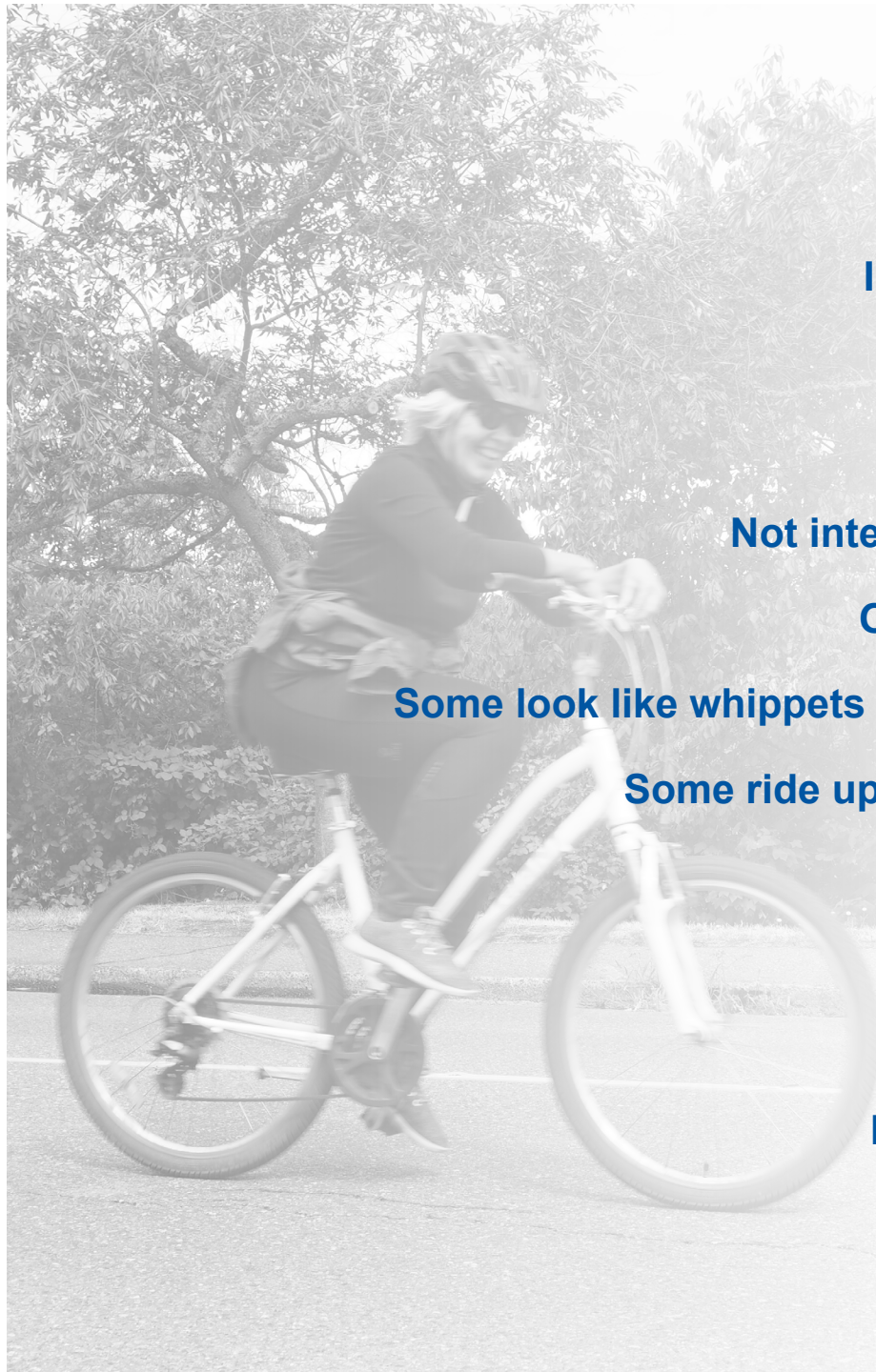
Some ride upright to take in the view

Some ride for purpose

Others ride just to ride.

And ride they do

For as long as they can.



## About The 50+ Cycling Survey

The 50+ Cycling Survey is a nationwide survey of older adults who cycle. Carol Kachadoorian, founder of [dbTilde Collaborative](#), initiated the survey in 2018 to gain useful information about cycling history, habits, and preferences. Now in its third year, results shown here represent over 2,000 respondents ages 50 to 85-plus and can be used by engineers, planners, public health and recreation professionals, advocates, decision-makers, and others. The survey helps answer the question: how can our growing understanding of older cyclists affect policy, programs, design, and practice? A pdf of this year's survey is in Appendix A.

Open for response from February 14 to July 31, 2020, the survey was distributed with the assistance of cycling advocates, planning professionals specializing in active transportation, and through the [AARP Livable Communities e-newsletter](#) and social media platforms.



This year's survey overlapped the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of the pandemic and stay-at-home orders affected some results such as cycling frequency.

For more information about the survey, to ask about specific analysis, and to offer to promote the survey in 2021, contact dbTilde Collaborative at [dbtildecollab@gmail.com](mailto:dbtildecollab@gmail.com) or (202) 713-9397.

## Highlights

This Databook is rich in data, cyclist experiences, and observations. This section is drawn from select portions of the Databook. It is a modified Executive Summary in that it highlights new or interesting findings and conclusions and identifies areas for improving the reach of subsequent surveys, rather than summarizing findings. Readers interested in the detailed analysis are encouraged to spend time reviewing the entire document.

Two things of note about the survey:

- First, there are some limitations of the survey which are noted throughout the Databook, primarily related to demographic bias. See the [last portion](#) of these Highlights for more information on how the 2021 survey will address these limitations.
- Second, the survey was conducted and proceeds during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, several findings and suggestions are specific to COVID, but most are broadly applicable for ongoing practice and behaviors.

## *Trends and Opportunities*

Many older adults love cycling and intend to continue doing so as long as they can. Their cycling experiences and desires vary by age, their health, where they live, who they cycle with, and how they understand cycling as part of their lives. Understanding this will better inform planning and policy directed at the needs of older adults and provide tools and resources for people who wish to extend their cycling beyond traditional limits brought about by aging.

Maintaining a certain level of cycling ability and agility is important to continue cycling. Because changes in both can creep up on people as they age, older adults may benefit from outreach and education to prepare them to make changes that will keep them cycling, including their expectations about cycling. For example, ways to encourage cycling with others through formal programs or resources provides motivation and social connectedness. Informal or locally sponsored cycling groups offer both.

Also important is considering options for bicycles and accessories. Finding the right bicycle may require looking at how someone's cycling experience is changing and what their new expectations are. This 2007 guide from Vinnova, a Swedish organization that studied cycling and older adults, [Better Bicycles: An analysis of the needs and requirements of older cyclists](#), is a good resource and includes recommendations for bicycles that work better for older cyclists. For example, road bike cyclists may benefit from transitioning to a hybrid or touring bike. Changing from pedal clips to regular pedals may also be needed, as a fair number of older cyclists fell because they could not unclip.

Electronically assisted bicycles (eBikes) will continue to grow in popularity, especially as more models are introduced in the market. Despite their benefits, some older cyclists may be reluctant to purchase an eBike, feeling that the purchase would connote a loss of vitality. When advising older adults on what bicycle to purchase, it is more useful to discuss the full range of options, such as number of wheels, sitting position, and propelling choices, rather than to immediately go to an eBike.

The analysis of Falls in this Databook includes respondent-provided information on balance issues, which is important to consider when selecting a bicycle. Trikes (three-wheeled cycles) may be an under-appreciated bicycle style, but there is some growth in this market because it includes many types that can fit different cycling styles.<sup>1</sup>

Affordability may affect an older cyclist's ability to purchase either an eBike or trike. While this Databook does not cross-reference these affordability answers with household income, affordability does affect the type of bicycle people own. A bicycle that does not fit either the rider or her/his type of cycling may reduce the amount of riding s/he does if a proper fitting bicycle is not affordable.



**Figure 1. Photo from survey respondents completing online journal**

Bicycle shops can be a valuable resource for older adults who want to start riding again or to cycle more. These people may have an older bicycle that does not fit their needs now. Because bicycle shops have experienced a renaissance due to COVID-19, as more people return to cycling, bicycle shops could consider increased outreach to let older cyclists know of their COVID-19 safety protocols, allowing them to offer in-neighborhood pop-up shops to repair bikes and sell new or used bikes.

Creating policy and design that removes barriers is equally important to keeping older adults cycling. Survey respondents noted where bicycling infrastructure is missing or inadequate. This includes the lack of connections between home and destinations for longer rides, work, socializing, shopping, and dining. Responding to older adults' cycling patterns includes network planning, design, and maintenance. Older adult communities should also be design to support cycling both within and with connections to the adjacent bicycle network. Something similar to Senior Zones for areas where a high number of older pedestrians' travel could be considered for cycling routes used by lots of older riders, perhaps as an expansion of existing Safe Routes for Seniors work.

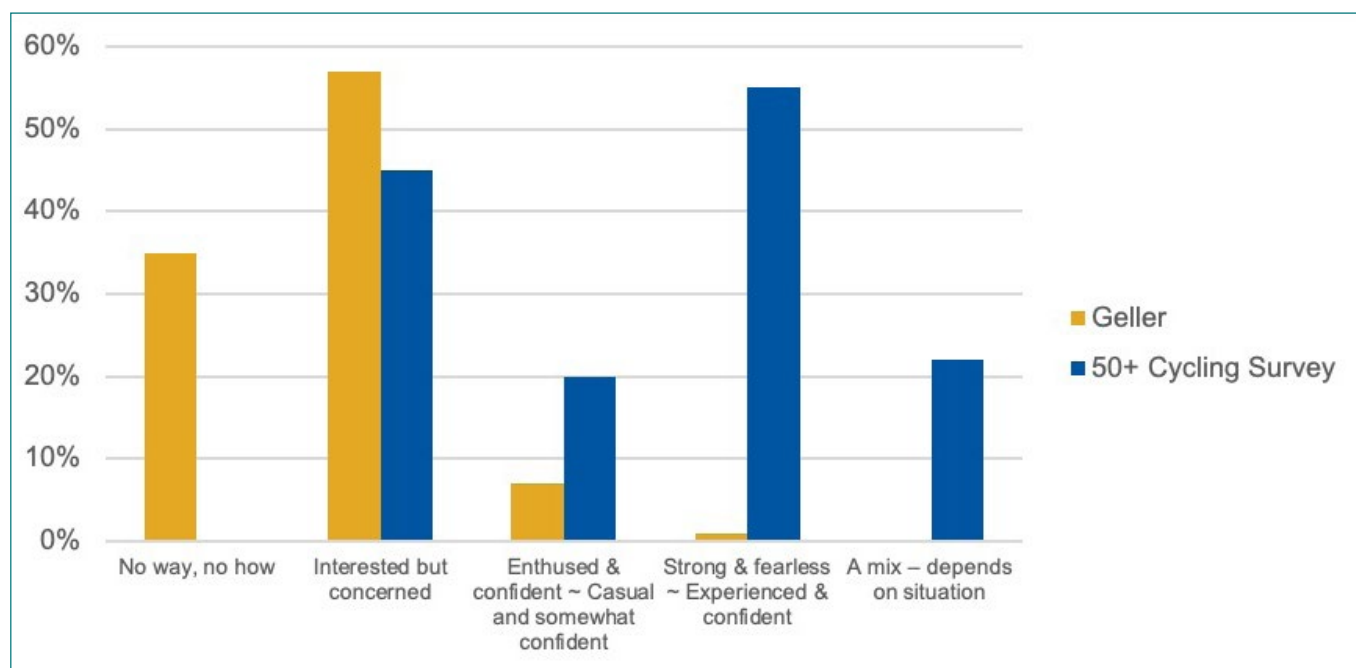
### *Interesting Findings from the Survey*

While most respondents learned to cycle as a child or teenager, some within each age group learned as a young adult or even over the age of 50. This suggests that non-cycling adults can and do learn to ride. Some communities offer programs to encourage older adults to learn to ride, including options for a good-fitting bicycle. These programs can be developed by a local health or recreation department, the local area agency on aging, or by a local bicycle shop.

<sup>1</sup> See this Washington Post article from 2018: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/hot-wheels-todays-adult-tricycles-are-low-sleek-and-speedy/2018/10/09/58570dd4-bdc6-11e8-8792-78719177250f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/wellness/hot-wheels-todays-adult-tricycles-are-low-sleek-and-speedy/2018/10/09/58570dd4-bdc6-11e8-8792-78719177250f_story.html).

## General highlights:

- Many cannot envision a time when they would stop cycling but admit that a physical condition could make it difficult to continue cycling.
- The top three factors for determining where respondents cycle are: safety, good infrastructure conditions, and few or no motor vehicles (such as on trails, separated facilities, and neighborhood streets).
- More near misses occurred with motorists and other cyclists than other modes.
- Because survey respondents currently cycle, Geller's four-type of cyclist typology was modified to reflect this by replacing the *No way, No how* type with the *A Mix – depends on situation*. This new type resonated with many respondents.
- The resulting distribution in comparison to the Geller typology is shown below:<sup>2</sup>



- Respondents who cycle regularly are more likely to consider themselves *Experienced and confident*. Fall rates for this group, however, regardless of gender, were higher than rates for those who considered themselves as one of the other types.

## Age and gender differences include:

- Near miss and fall rates for women were higher than for men.

<sup>2</sup> Differences in the distribution of respondents from the Geller typology are likely due to three factors: all respondents currently cycle so the *No way, No how* type was not needed; the new type offered a type that resonated with cyclists, and wording was slightly different for the remaining two type (indicated below with the tilde (~) between them).

- Cycling rates for respondents 76 and older held steady compared to younger age groups. This may be due to increased time available to ride.
- eBike owners are older, with highest ownership rates for those 76 and older.

Type of bicycle and accessory differences include:

- eBike owners tend to have higher fall rates than regular pedal bike owners.<sup>3</sup>
- Typical ‘men’s’ bikes are more difficult to get on and off (as opposed to what most of us consider a ‘ladies’ bike with a low step-through crossbar).
- Pedal clips caused or were frequently part of a fall because the cyclist could not unclip.

### *What We Can Do Better for Year 4 of the Survey*

The following ways to improve the next survey iteration were identified while completing the analysis and through talking with several respondents:

- Better outreach to achieve better representation of ethnicity and income.
- Better photos and clearer intent for the Visual Preference Survey.
- More specific options to capture experiences of mountain and touring bicycling.
- Questions about bikeshare use.
- Information on scooter use and their impact on older cyclists.
- More specific questions about COVID-19 on cycling habits.
- Outreach to older adults who do not cycle to learn what barriers can be addressed to encouraged cycling.

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<sup>3</sup> Based on studies of crashes, many are self-accidents, perhaps due to travel higher speeds and difficulties in handling a heavier bicycle. See these two studies: <https://www.hindawi.com/journals/emi/2014/850236/> and <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S000145751830174X>.

## Acknowledgement

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Image source: <https://bicycledutch.wordpress.com/2013/10/31/elderly-people-on-a-cycle-tour/>

I recall when I was in Denmark somebody told me that his 80-year-old mother had agreed she was at the “bicycle age.” When I looked confused, he said, “Oh, you see it’s not safe for her to be driving a car anymore. Lots of elderly switch back to bicycling...”

## About the Author

Carol Kachadoorian is dbiTilde Collaborative's Founder and Mobility Practioner. Carol has a breadth of knowledge and expertise in transportation planning and operations, which began in Alexandria, VA, where she served as a transit analyst before leading the City's first Office of Transit Services. After several years working with a family design-build company and at a major university, Carol returned to the transportation industry with the Washington, DC region's transit agency. There, she worked in operations and communications before focusing on pedestrian and bicyclists access to transit. Carol's work with Toole Design from 2008 to 2020 focused on school- and community-based active transportation plans. She started dbiTilde Collaborative in 2020, specializing in older adult mobility and wellness.

## To Learn More

For more details about the study, download the full report at [transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2112](https://transweb.sjsu.edu/research/2112)

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