ACTIVE TRAVEL STUDIES

Lay summary

Clutter and Compliance: Scooter Parking Interventions and Perceptions

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OVERVIEW

- Members of the public and transport professionals in both Auckland (New Zealand) and Washington, DC (USA) overestimate the amount of scooter misparking (parking that does not comply with regulations)
- People think scooters are misparked more than cars
- People do not differentiate between scooters being parked untidily and actual misparking
- The application of scooter bans may reflect these exaggerated perceptions of misparking

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Parking, sidewalk riding, and vandalism are typically the greatest sources of public conflict and contention for shared e-scooter programs. Poor parking and sidewalk riding endanger pedestrians and pose a nuisance, particularly for people with mobility impairments. Between 8% and 33% of parked scooters do not comply with city regulations according to earlier research. Some differences across cities reflect varied scooter parking requirements - such as whether one can park a scooter at a bus stop or in the "furniture zone". A parking metric that can be more readily compared across cities is whether a scooter impedes pedestrian access by blocking the sidewalk, curb ramp, crosswalk, etc. A study of five US cities found, for example, that just 1.7% of parked scooters impeded pedestrian access, on a par with or slightly lower than in earlier studies.

Cities' experiences with shared scooters are short, and the understanding of parking problems and their solutions is evolving. Our study produced three main findings:

1. People consistently overestimate scooter misparking.
2. People think scooters are misparked more than cars.
3. People do not differentiate between untidy scooters and misparking.

We address these issues through intercept survey data from Auckland, New Zealand, and Washington, DC, USA. We collected 125 complete surveys from pedestrians in Auckland and 58 in Washington, DC. We asked respondents to estimate the share of scooters, bicycles, and cars that are improperly parked in the study city and their perceptions of scooter parking by showing them a random selection of parking scenarios. We also asked similar questions to transportation professionals who regulate and manage shared scooter programs. We surveyed participants at four professional transportation conferences or meetings.

1 People consistently overestimate scooter misparking.

Respondents overestimated the prevalence of improper scooter parking. In Auckland, people estimated that 20 – 30% of scooters are parked improperly; in reality, field data we collected showed that 15% did not comply with local regulations, and just 5% impeded access. In Washington, DC, people estimated that more than 30% of scooters are parked improperly, compared with 19% being noncompliant with local parking regulations, and 6% impeding access.

Transportation professionals perceived similar rates of improper parking compared to the public. The median transportation professional respondent reported that 20 – 30% of scooters are parked improperly.

2 People think scooters are misparked more than cars.

Respondents perceive that people mispark scooters more frequently than bicycles or cars, when the opposite is true.

Respondents overestimated rates of noncompliant bicycle parking, but they said they believe it occurs less frequently than noncompliant scooter parking. The median response was that 5%–10% of bicycles are improperly parked; 18% of respondents said more than 30% of bicycles are improperly parked, and 33% of respondents estimated that fewer than 5% of bicycles are improperly parked. By contrast, previous studies suggest fewer than 1% of bicycles impede pedestrian access.

While respondents overestimate improper scooter and bicycle parking relative to field observations, they underestimate car parking violations. In an earlier study, we found that a quarter of all parked cars blocked access for other travelers in five US cities, yet only a small percentage of respondents (13%) estimated that 20 – 30% of cars are parked improperly. The median respondent estimated that 10 – 20% of cars are parked improperly.

Transportation professionals also underestimated car misparking and overestimated bicycle misparking.

3 People do not differentiate between untidy scooters and misparking.

Survey respondents appear to use two considerations in identifying whether a shared scooter is parked properly: pedestrian accessibility and visual clutter.

Pedestrian accessibility is a primary condition the public uses to assess proper scooter parking. The overwhelming majority (85 – 90%) of people viewed scooters parked at bike racks, in parking corrals, or neatly arranged in the furniture zone as parked properly. There was plenty of sidewalk space for pedestrian access in these three cases.

Conversely, the public decisively identified scenarios that may pose accessibility hazards (such as tipped over scooters or scooters that blocked curb cuts) as noncompliant with local parking rules.

In addition to access, the public appeared to see "tidiness" as equivalent to compliant scooter parking. We presented respondents with two similar scenarios where scooters were parked in the furniture zone of a wide sidewalk, with one scenario showing "tidy" scooter parking and the other "messy". In the tidy scenario, three parked scooters are neatly aligned parallel with one another on a wide sidewalk. The messy scenario shows the same three scooters parked at different angles from one another but not obstructing the sidewalk. Despite similar positioning on the sidewalk, three-quarters of people said that the tidy scooters complied with local scooter regulations, compared to just one-quarter for the messy scooters.

Takeaways

Public perceptions influence the narrative around scooter programs and policies governing scooter parking. However, discussions about scooter parking need to start from a place of shared understanding—namely, what counts as improper parking and how often it happens. We find that the public and transportation professionals overestimate the prevalence of scooter misparking. We also find concerns about pedestrian accessibility and an aesthetic sense of tidiness and order largely drive public perceptions of improper parking. Perceptions of "clutter" may lead to higher perceived non-compliant parking than occurs when judged by local regulations or impedance.

City officials continue to evaluate the future of their shared micromobility programs. But, as our research shows, if decision-makers applied the same logic behind scooter bans to other modes, we soon would have bans against most modes of travel. We encourage decision-makers to take a pragmatic approach to scooter parking through thoughtful regulation and infrastructure, rather than heavy-handed approaches like bans.

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