



# Why Cycling Vanished in the City of Erbil in Kurdistan

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## Introduction

It is well-known that non-motorized travel modes form a relatively small portion of the commuting activity worldwide. That is despite the fact that the modes play important roles within many of the local transportation systems. The most important prerequisite for research on cycling is to gather available data relating to cycling as transport mode. However, unlike motorized transport, focus has not been on research on bicycles as a mode of transport in general. In Iraq, I was not able to find any data collection, statistical analysis or research on cycling as a mode of transport or recreation cycling. This means that I had to start from scratch without any national threshold as a baseline.

A pre-study quickly revealed that in the 1 million populated city of Erbil, the individual motorized vehicles are prioritized and are mainly used. This figure, however, was different during the bicycle boom in the 1970s. The bicycle use is currently almost nonexistent, although the city has excellent topography and a suitable climate for bicycle use. Thus, the purpose of this study is to examine the subjective and objective factors that restrained people from utilizing bicycle on utilitarian trips. Moreover, the study aims to evaluate potentials to re-cultivate bicycle usage as a sustainable and practical travel mode. An integral part of this will be an exploration of the major demand in using bicycles as a form of travel.

**Figure 1: Bicycles were widely used in the 1970s as commute and transport mode**



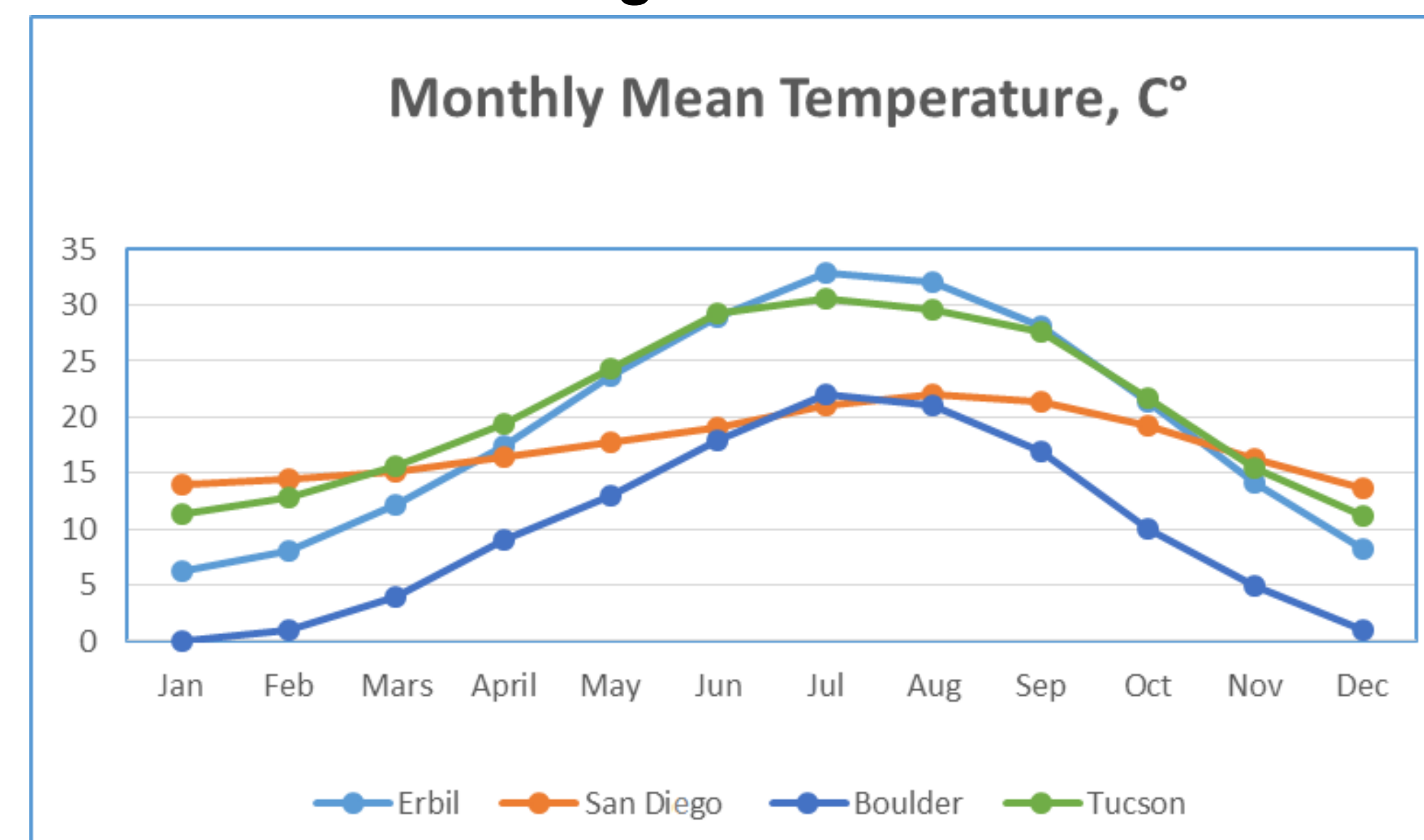
## Methods

The methodology body started by gaining a perspective on the subject and laying the groundwork for the study, thus it was an essential prerequisite to clearly understand the development of the bicycle usage historically. Conducting biographic surveys was the only way of collecting data due to limited sources. The investigation was based on how people travelled in the past, during their childhood and how their parents and other people travelled. The survey was conducted on elderly people generally and in particular on bicycle riders, bicycle sellers and repairmen, and traffic police officers. Moreover, old pictures of the city was another source to estimate the rate of the bicycle use in the past.

The next step of the methodology was to explore and analyze subjective factors that influenced individuals to avoid bicycle transportation which led to vanishing bicycling in this large city. The data collection was based on questionnaires and interviewing different segments of the society.

The last step of the methodology was to focus on functional dimensions of demand for bicycle use. The objective factors included analyzing urban environment, and infrastructure suitability for bicycling in the city. The analysis was depended on visual observations and interviews. Moreover, investigating the role of public policy, considering both subjective and objective factors, in encouraging bicycle commuters in the city.

**Figure 2: Weather in Erbil compared to most suitable cities for biking as San Diego**



## Results

In the 1 million populated city of Erbil, the individual motorized vehicles are currently prioritized and are mainly used. While in the 1980's and 1990's public transportation, in form of buses, together with individual motorized vehicle were largely used. The biographic survey in this study showed that these figures, however, were different in the 1960's and 1970's when non-motorized transport modes such as walking and bicycle usage were competitive to motorized vehicles. The bicycle use in Erbil peaked during the 1970s where the rate of bicycle users, both utilitarian (figure 1) and recreational, as high as the rate of registered private vehicles. That was despite the fact that the cost of buying a bicycle was relatively high which equated to 2 months full time labor or 80% of a government official's monthly salary. The users of bicycles were teenagers, government employees, peddlers, postmen, police officers, etc. [1]. The rate of bicycle commuters in the city, however, diminished dramatically starting from the early 80s along with the increasing motorized travel modes. Though, the number of private vehicles increased by more than 1000% in the 1980s compared to the 1970s. While the increase, the last two decades, was 40000% compared to 1970s, from approximately 1000 private vehicles to more than 400 000 in 2014.

The results of the survey showed that the rate of bicycle use is declined to 0.05%, while the main barrier of not using a bicycle (82%) was because it is an unusual commute mode and not accepted by the society. While 13% of the respondents indicated that safe bikeways would induce them to start bicycling and it was interesting to note that 31% could not use bicycle mostly female and older men.

The city has a flat topography, no hills, where the roads has maximum 5% inclination. The climate generally, 300 days a year, is ideal for cycling. The mean monthly temperature is below 30° (figure 2) which is conducive for cycling except the hot climate in July and August where mean temperatures are 32,9 and 32,1 respectively. The city lacks bicycling facilities including bikeways, there is only 1400 m official and unsafe bikeway as the only effort from the policy makers to promote bicycle commuters among students (figure 3). The visual observations and interviews with Round-the-world Cyclists revealed that there are serious safety deficiencies for cyclists in Erbil. The concerns over traffic safety includes all the ingredients in rating the safety for cyclists such as traffic pattern, driver's knowledge, road conditions, traffic signs and lack of bikeways.

The very limited number of cyclists in the city includes competitive cyclists, teenagers, countable western employees at universities and companies, laborers from low-income countries who cannot afford cars and few local old men who share public roads with car users. Only professionals and competitive cyclists use appropriate dress codes and are concerned about safety equipment such as helmets, reflexes, lamps, etc.

## Conclusions

The main reasons for declining cycling activities and increasing the rate car usage were: the economic boom suddenly made it possible for people to purchase a car, the low cost of operating a car, no cycling policies, serious traffic hazards, lack of cycling infrastructure and facility (only 1,4 km official bicycle road in Erbil) and dissuasion by family and friends. The last mentioned reason stems from socio-cultural perceptions on cycling. In many societies, including Kurdish society, cycling for daily transportation is perceived to be humiliating, and the cyclists are seen as low-skilled poor people, who cannot afford to buy cars.

The flat topography with street mileage ratio 0.05:1 and the Mild, dry climate ( 300 days per year) indicates that the city has an ideal topography and weather criteria[3]. A reasonable recommendation to stimulate and re-cultivate biking is that an improved bicycling infrastructure as linked network is essential. That is along with campaigns to enhance knowledge and advantages of riding bicycles.

**Figure 3: The only 1.4 km long official and unsafe bikeway in Erbil**



## Bibliography

1. Biographic surveys, interviews and archives pictures
2. Data from Erbil Municipality.
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