Skateboard parks: the time has come to develop policies to reduce injuries

Kelly Russell,1,2 Jenna Mitchell-Dueck,2 Barbara Morrongiello3

The built environment can exacerbate risk factors for illness and injury or be purposely constructed to contribute to healthy lifestyles. Healthy built environments promote physical activity, connect communities, and can lower the risk of injury. For example, when the built environment does not allow for the separation of motor vehicles from modes of active transport such as walking, biking, or skateboarding, there is an increased risk of injury, particularly among children and adolescents. Designing safer streets to reduce pedestrian and cyclist collisions with motor vehicles is an important strategy. Nonetheless, the current number of injuries and fatalities indicates that further actions are needed.

Traffic control measures such as speed bumps, reduced speed limits and roundabouts reduce vehicle speeds and injury risk, but they do not provide a safe space for vulnerable road users. While separated sidewalks and bike lanes can enhance safety for pedestrians and cyclists, other recreational road users, such as skateboarders, remain vulnerable.

Injuries commonly occurred on pipes and obstacles and resulted in falls that were more severe; therefore, designing skateparks with features that limit flip tricks will likely reduce serious falls. This analytic approach of linking tricks with features and both tricks and features to injury outcomes could be applied across skateparks to help differentiate those designs that minimise injury risk and to determine if modifications to an existing skatepark have improved safety.

In addition, policies and guidelines from similar sport-related built environments may help inform future skatepark designs. The Association of Quebec Ski Resorts lists unenforced recommendations for the design, construction, and maintenance of terrain parks and compliance with the adapted checklist in Quebec terrain parks was high (≈91%).

The injury profile and features in terrain parks and skateparks are similar so it is possible that developing similar policies related to skateparks would reduce injuries among participants.

Active initiatives such as policies to mandate personal protective equipment also merit action. Helmets are recommended for some sport and recreation participation and some jurisdictions have legislated their use. Protective equipment initiatives have yet to see widespread adoption in public skateparks across Canada and the USA.

Helmet compliance varies but increases in the presence of education, legislation, and enforcement. For example, Canada Skateboard has required helmets at all sanctioned domestic and international events since 2017, but this is rarely reflected in recreational skatepark users.

In Canada, Nova Scotia has the most stringent provincial helmet laws and is the only province to require all ages to wear a helmet when skateboarding, bicycling, and scootering. They

1 Pediatrics and Child Health, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
2 Children’s Hospital Research Institute of Manitoba, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
3 Department of Psychology, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

Correspondence to Dr Kelly Russell, Pediatrics and Child Health, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada; KRussell@chcm.ca

1 Pediatric and Child Health, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
2 Children’s Hospital Research Institute of Manitoba, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
3 Department of Psychology, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

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References

1. Pediatrics and Child Health, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
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3. Department of Psychology, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

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3 Department of Psychology, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada

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also have implemented ski and snowboard helmet laws. Prior to legislation, Nova Scotia used social media and educational campaigns and this increased helmet usage from 74% to 90%, with legislation improving uptake to 100%. Municipalities in other provinces, such as St. John and North Vancouver have since implemented bylaws regulating helmets for all skateboarders. This is important since the odds of severe traumatic brain injury were significantly lower among those who wore a helmet (OR: 0.54; 95% CI 0.45, 0.63). In a skatepark with both mandatory and enforced helmet use policy with supervision, helmet use increased to nearly 91%. Thus, there are positive trends toward mandating helmet usage for skatepark users; however, participant compliance is essential, and this will likely require enforcement.

Other initiatives to improve skateboarder safety, reduce injury risk, and promote physical activity should be explored alongside helmet policies. Recommendations can be broadly classified based on the ‘3 Es’ of injury prevention—Education, Enforcement and Engineering. For example, education opportunities might include promoting the use of skateparks instead of street infrastructure and informing skateboarders about possible longer-term negative physical effects of returning to the sport before fully recovered from injury. Enforcement opportunities might include mandating compliance with protective equipment usage policies and appropriate use of the environment, similar to patrollers who enforce safe skiing and snowboarding or lifeguards who ensure safe behaviours at swimming pools. Engineering initiatives might be reflected in safer designs as highlighted above or modifications such as adding signage or colour coding to indicate feature difficulty in skateparks akin to ski resort trail difficulty markings.

In conclusion, developing design guidelines and evaluating policies to improve skatepark safety is critical for reducing injuries, and both passive and active prevention strategies have an important role to play.

**Twitter** Kelly Russell @KellyRussellPhD®

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