

Pocket Guide to

Bike Laws

in the District of Columbia



WABA
WASHINGTON AREA
BICYCLIST ASSOCIATION



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Pocket Guide to
Bike Laws
in the District of Columbia

in partnership with



This guide, which is produced by the Washington Area Bicyclist Association, the District of Columbia Department of Transportation, and the Metropolitan Police Department, is designed to help inform both bicyclists and law enforcement officers of the rights and responsibilities of bicyclists on DC streets. Unless otherwise noted, all quoted regulations are taken from the District of Columbia Municipal Regulations (DCMR), Title 18 “Vehicles and Traffic”, Chapter 12 “Bicycles, Motorized Bicycles, and Miscellaneous Vehicles”, and Chapter 22 “Moving Violations”. For direct links to the DCMR, as well as for links to the laws of other areas, please visit **waba.org/bikelaws**

INTRODUCTION

Thanks for picking up a copy of the *Pocket Guide to Bike Laws in The District of Columbia!*

Let's start with a few basic principles:

It's ok to ride your bike on the road. Bicycling is an important part of our city's transportation system. When you ride, it's your responsibility to obey the law and keep yourself and the people around you safe. It's not your job to stay out of the way.

Yield to people walking. Like bicyclists, pedestrians are vulnerable on and around our roads. It's not their responsibility to stay out of your way. It is up to you to negotiate space in a way that is comfortable and safe for people walking.

Be polite to other bicyclists. Lots of different people ride bicycles for lots of different reasons. This is good! Be aware of how your riding affects other people on bikes, and exercise patience and kindness in your interactions with them.

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TRAFFIC LAWS

Does a bicyclist have to obey traffic laws?

Yes, bicyclists have to obey traffic laws.

According to the DC Municipal Regulations:

Title 18, Section 1201.1,

“Every person riding a bicycle on a highway shall be subject to all the duties applicable to the drivers of motor vehicles under this title, except as otherwise expressly provided in the chapter, and except for those duties imposed by this title which, by their nature, can have no reasonable application to a bicycle operator.”

In addition Section 1201.15 states, “No person shall operate a bicycle except in obedience to the instructions of official traffic control signals, signs, and other control devices applicable to vehicles, unless otherwise directed by a police officer or other person authorized to direct and control traffic.”

Does a bicyclist have to ride with traffic?

Yes, bicyclists must ride with traffic. Wrong way riding is the cause of many bike crashes. There are new on-street bike facilities called contra-flow bike lanes that route bicyclists against traffic. Follow all posted signs and markings.

Who has the right-of-way in a crosswalk?

According to Section 1201.11, a bicyclist in a crosswalk has all the rights and responsibilities as a pedestrian in a crosswalk, though bicyclists must yield right-of-way to pedestrians.

According to Title 50, Section 2201.28, at unsignalized crossings, drivers must stop and yield the right-of-way to a pedestrian crossing the roadway. At signalized crosswalks, drivers must yield the right-of-way.



Does a bicyclist have to stop at red lights?

Yes. Bicyclists must follow all traffic signs and traffic lights. Bicyclists may use the pedestrian crossing signal, including the “leading pedestrian interval” before the green light.

Is it legal to ride between lanes?

According to the DCMR, a bicyclist can split lanes.

Section 1201.3(b) states:

“A person operating a bicycle may overtake and pass other vehicles on the left or right side, staying in the same lane as the overtaken vehicle, or changing to a different lane, or riding off the roadway, as necessary to pass with safety.”

Paragraph (c) in this section states,

“If a lane is partially occupied by vehicles that are stopped, standing, or parked in that lane, a person operating a bicycle may ride in that or in the next adjacent lane used by vehicles proceeding in the same direction.”

Does a bicyclist have to ride in a bike lane?

No. There are no regulations in DC which state that bicyclists must use a bike lane when one is provided.

How much space are drivers required to give when passing?

Three feet.

According to Title 18, Section 2202.10

“A person driving a motor vehicle shall exercise due care by leaving a safe distance, but in no case less than 3 feet, when overtaking and passing a bicycle.”



Is it legal to ride on the sidewalk?

While not recommended safe bicycling practice in most instances, DC code states that bicyclists are allowed to ride on the sidewalk as long as they are outside the central business district (CBD). However, if cyclists do ride on the sidewalk they must yield the right-of-way to pedestrians.

The CBD is bounded by 2nd Street NE and SE, D Street SE and SW, 14th Street SW and NW, Constitution Ave NW, 23rd Street NW, and Massachusetts Ave NW. (You can find a map at waba.org/bikelaws) Within the CBD, bicycling is allowed on lands under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service including places like Lafayette Park, Farragut Square Park, the National Mall and Dupont Circle.



Do I need to register my bike?

No.

As of June 1st, 2008, bikes are no longer required to be registered in the District and you cannot be pulled over for having an unregistered bike.

For security reasons, WABA still recommends registering your bike with the National Bike Registry or another comparable service. More information can be found at

[**waba.org/resources/preventing-bicycle-theft/**](http://waba.org/resources/preventing-bicycle-theft/)

Is it legal for bicyclists to ride two abreast?

Yes.

Section 1201.7:

“Persons riding upon a roadway shall not ride more than two abreast except on paths or part of roadways set aside for the exclusive use of bicycles. Persons riding two abreast shall not impede the normal and reasonable movement of traffic and, on a laned roadway, shall ride within a single lane.”

Can cars be parked in a bike lane?

No.

Section 2405.1(g) states that it's illegal to stop, stand or park in a bike lane.

To report a car parked in a bike lane, please call 311. You will need to request parking enforcement for a "No Parking Anytime" zone.



A bicyclist has been doored. Who's at fault?

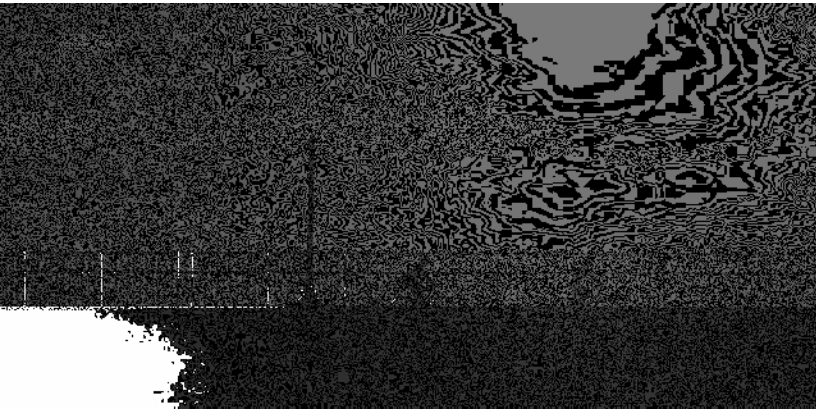
The person in the car.

Section 2214.4 reads,

“No person shall open a door of a vehicle on the side where traffic is approaching unless it can be done without interfering with moving traffic, bicyclists, or pedestrians and with safety to himself or herself and passengers.”

Are cars allowed in shared bus/bike lanes?

Only in a few very specific circumstances: According to Section 2220, to discharge passengers or make a legal right turn. As with any lane change, the driver must yield to traffic currently in the lane, including bicyclists, and obey traffic lights and signals like normal.



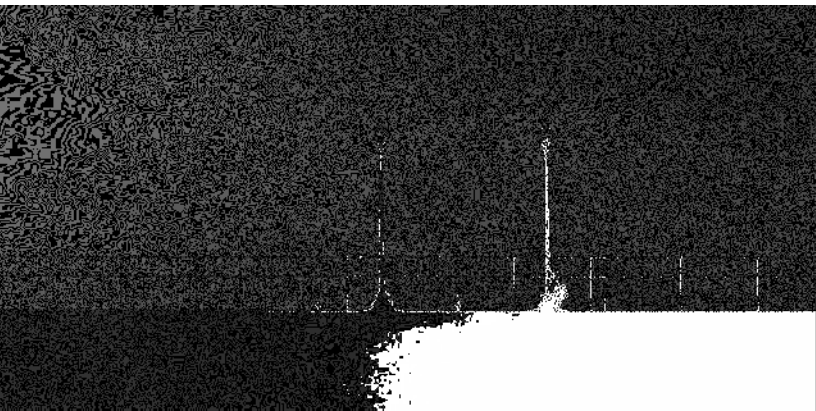
Is it legal to talk on a cell phone while riding?

While certainly not safe, it is legal to talk on a cell phone while riding, unless it prevents the operator from keeping one hand on the handlebars.

According to Title 50, Section 1731.04,

“No person shall use a mobile telephone or other electronic device while operating a moving motor vehicle in the District of Columbia unless the telephone or device is equipped with a hands-free accessory.”

Note that the code refers to motor vehicles, which are defined as “all vehicles propelled by internal-combustion engines, electricity, or steam.” The cell phone ban does not apply when dialing police or emergency services, nor does it apply to police or emergency personnel if acting within the scope of their official duties.



Can construction block a bike lane?

No.

According to Title 24 Section 3315, construction sites must provide safe accommodations that are “equal to the accommodation that was provided to pedestrians and bicyclists before the blockage of the sidewalk, bicycle lane, or other public bicycle path.”

Contact the Public Space Regulation Administration at DDOT (202-442-4670) to report a suspected permit violation or visit waba.org/blockedbikelane to submit a report online.



COMMON ENFORCEMENT SITUATIONS

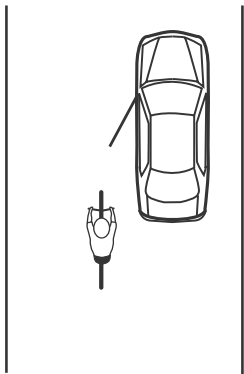
1. Dooring

INCIDENT:

Bicyclist struck by motorist opening door into traffic.

CORRECT MPD RESPONSE:

Officer cites the driver for violating Title 18, 2214.4, which prohibits opening or permitting the opening of a car door on either side that poses danger to a pedestrian, bicyclist, or motor vehicle.



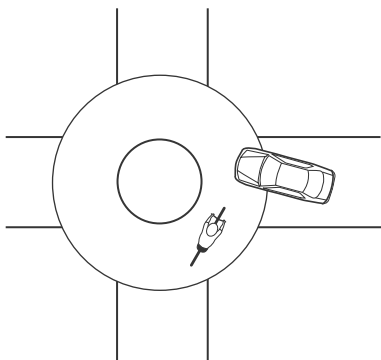
2. Traffic Circle

INCIDENT:

Bicyclist in traffic circle is struck by driver entering the circle.

CORRECT MPD RESPONSE:

Officer cites motorist for failing to yield right-of-way to traffic already within the circle (Title 18, 2208.7).



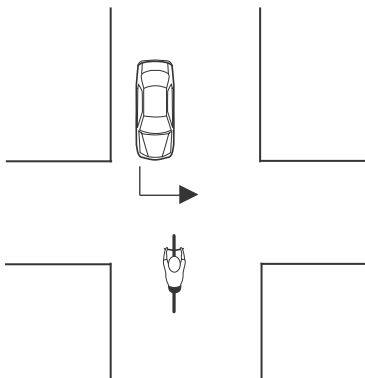
3. Left-turning Driver

INCIDENT:

Bicyclist riding straight is hit by an oncoming driver turning left across their path.

CORRECT MPD RESPONSE:

Officer cites turning driver for failing to yield the right-of-way to the bicyclist who was going straight (Title 18, 1200.3). Turning drivers must yield to vehicles approaching from the opposite direction (Title 18, 2207.4 and 2208.2).



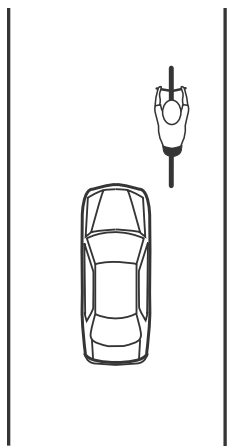
4. Passing Too Closely

INCIDENT:

Bicyclist riding on the right side of the road is struck by overtaking driver in the same lane.

CORRECT MPD RESPONSE:

Officer cites driver under Title 18, 2202.2, which requires an overtaking driver to pass to the left at a safe distance, and Title 18, Section 2202.10, which requires that drivers leave no less than three feet when passing a bicyclist.



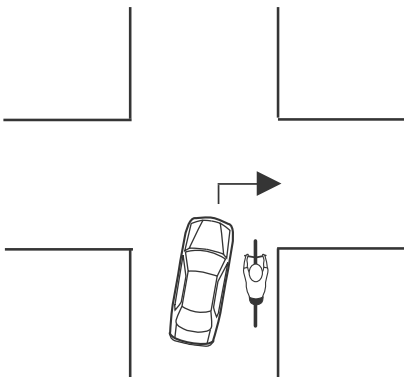
5. Right-turning Driver

INCIDENT:

Bicyclist going straight in the right lane is hit by a driver from same lane while the driver is making a right turn.

CORRECT MPD RESPONSE:

Officer cites driver. Title 18, 2203.3 requires that both the approach for a right turn and the turn itself shall be made as close as practicable to the right-hand curb or edge of the roadway. Additionally, Title 18, 2202.2 requires that a driver passing another vehicle on the left shall not again drive to the right side of the roadway until safely clear of the overtaken vehicle.



6. Sidewalk Riding

INCIDENT:

Bicyclist riding on the sidewalk outside of the Central Business District.

CORRECT MPD RESPONSE:

Officer does not cite bicyclist for riding on the sidewalk. Title 18, 1201.9 permits bicycle riding on sidewalks except in the Central Business District. (Roughly Massachusetts Avenue to the north, Constitution Avenue to the south, 23rd Street NW, to the west and 2nd Street, NE to the east). See page 13 for a map.

7. Riding Outside the Bike Lane

INCIDENT:

Bicyclist riding in the road when a path or bicycle lane is present.

CORRECT MPD RESPONSE:

Officer does not cite bicyclist. Title 18, 2220.6 states that the existence of Restricted Lanes on any roadway does not limit those vehicles for which the restrictions are established unless specifically indicated by signs.



BIKE LANE

8. Taking the Lane

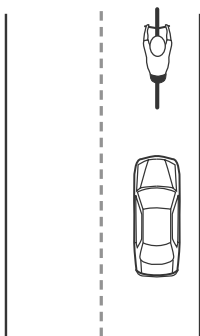
INCIDENT:

Bicyclist riding in the center of a travel lane is stopped by police for impeding traffic.

CORRECT MPD RESPONSE:

Officer does not cite bicyclist for obstructing traffic. Most travel lanes in DC are 10-12 feet wide. Drivers are required to pass bicyclists by a margin of at least 3 feet (Title 18, Section 2202.10). This means that on most roads, a driver cannot legally pass a bicyclist without changing lanes.

Title 18, 2602.1 does include a citation for impeding or obstructing traffic. However, according to Title 18, 1201.2 a bicyclist is required to ride in a “safe and non-hazardous manner.” Riding in the far right edge of a lane is usually not safe.



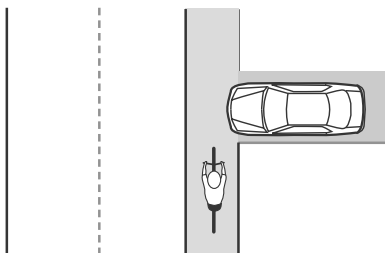
9. Driver not yielding

INCIDENT:

Bicyclist riding on sidewalk is hit by driver entering or exiting driveway.

CORRECT MPD RESPONSE:

Officer cites driver under Title 18, 2207.2, which requires that drivers of a vehicle crossing a sidewalk shall yield the right-of-way to any pedestrian and all other traffic using the sidewalk.



Filing a complaint:

If you feel that a police officer has behaved improperly or failed to carry out their duties, the Office of Police Complaints would like to hear from you.
Policecomplaints.dc.gov

BICYCLING INFRACTIONS

Below is a list of common bicycling infractions and the fines associated with them (18 DCMR § 2602.1).

- » Impeding or obstructing traffic (1201.3) [MPD Violation T067] \$25
- » Hazardous driving (1201.2) [MPD Violation T068] \$25
- » Riding abreast, obstructing traffic (1201.7) [MPD Violation T069] \$25
- » Speed, excessive (1201.8) [MPD Violation T070] \$50
- » Traffic control device, disobeying (1201.15) [MPD Violation T072] \$25
- » Hitching on vehicle (1201.16) [MPD Violation T348] \$50
- » Right-of-way, failure to yield (120 1.1) [MPD Violation T607] \$50
- » Riding on sidewalk where not permitted (1201.9) [MPD Violation T609] \$25
- » Excessive number of riders (1201.5) [MPD Violation T610] \$25
- » Improper equipment (1204) [MPD Violation T613] \$25

- » Improper Securing of Bicycle (1209) [MPD Violation T616] \$25
- » Carrying objects which prevent operator from keeping one hand on handle bars (1201.6) [MPD Violation T618] \$50
- » Sounding of warning device (1204.6) [MPD Violation T619] \$25
- » Colliding with a pedestrian crossing the roadway with the right-of-way (1201.9) [MPD Violation T824] \$150
- » Colliding with a pedestrian while riding a bicycle on a sidewalk (18 DCMR § 1201.9) [MPD Violation T825] \$100
- » Riding with a headset, headphones, or earplugs covering both ears (1201.9) [MPD Violation T826] \$50
- » The fine for any bicycle violation not listed in this section is twenty-five dollars [MPD Violation T623] \$25.00.

SAFETY EQUIPMENT

What are the helmet laws in DC?

According to Title 50, Section 1605(a) “Motor and Non-Motor Vehicles and Traffic”, Subtitle V, Chapter 16 “Regulation of Bicycles”,

“It shall be unlawful for any person under 16 years of age to operate or to be a passenger on a bicycle or any attachment to a bicycle on a public roadway, public bicycle path or other right-of-way, unless that person wears a protective helmet of good fit, fastened securely upon the head with the straps of the helmet.”

It's the law for children and it makes good safety sense for everyone.

Does a bike with a fixed gear need a brake?

No.

From Section 1204.1:

“Each bicycle shall be equipped with a brake which enables the operator to cause the braked wheels to skid on dry, level, clean pavement; provided, that a fixed gear bicycle is not required to have a separate brake, but an operator of a fixed gear bicycle shall be able to stop the bicycle using the pedals.”

Does a bike need lights when being ridden at night?

Yes, both front and rear, but enforcement officers may not stop you for not having them.

Section 1204.2 states:

“Each bicycle, when in use at night, shall be equipped with a lamp on the front which shall emit a steady or flashing white light visible from a distance of at least five hundred feet (500 ft.) to the front and with a lamp on the rear which shall emit a steady or flashing red light visible from a distance of at least five hundred feet (500 ft.) to the rear.”

Additionally, Section 1204.4 states,

“In place of the requirements of Section 1204.2, a lamp may be worn on the body of an operator; provided, that it may be readily seen from the distances set forth in that subsection.”

According to the Vision Zero Enhancement Omnibus Amendment Act of 2020, “a law enforcement officer, as identified in section 3003 of Title 18 of the District of Columbia Municipal Regulations, shall not stop an individual for a violation, or a perceived violation, of the bicycle safety equipment requirements under section 1204 of Title 18 of [DCMR].”

Does a bike need a bell?

No.

Under Section 1204.5 “A bicyclist riding within the District must be capable of making a warning noise, either with a bell or mechanical device, or with his or her voice, audible for a distance of at least one hundred feet (100 ft.)”



BIKE PARKING & SECURITY

What is the best way to lock a bike?

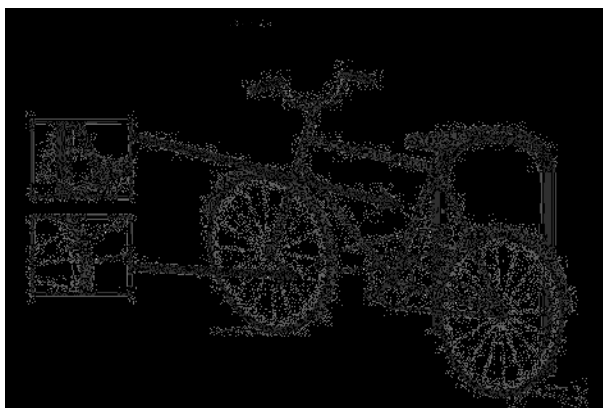
Given enough time and the right tools, any lock can be broken, but there are ways to reduce the likelihood of theft. Always be sure to lock your bike with a sturdy U-lock, even if you think you will only be away from it for a short time.

Use the U-lock to secure your bike frame and at least one wheel. Cables can be used in addition to U-locks to secure both wheels and your seat (see diagram right).

Consider a trip to your local bike shop to buy additional security devices such as locking quick release skewers and seat post bolts; they are far less expensive than replacing stolen wheels and seats.

Be sure to lock to something solid and permanent. If you need to lock to a sign post, make sure the sign cannot be easily pulled out of the ground.

If possible, lock your bike in a highly visible area that is close to your destination. Before you leave, be sure to take with you anything that can be removed from your bike such as unlocked wheels, seats, lights, bike bags, etc. Remember, if you can take it off, so can someone else.



Are buildings required to have bike parking?

Yes. Title 11, Chapter 21 provides a list of building types and the amount and type of bike parking required. For example, residential buildings of more than 8 units require one bicycle parking space for every three units. For more information visit **waba.org/parking**

Where can a bike be locked?

Section 1209.2 states,

“A person may secure a bicycle to a stanchion [parking meter or other pole] by means of a lock or similar device as long as securing the bicycle does not obstruct or unduly impede traffic or pedestrian movement and as long as securing bicycles has not been forbidden by any notice posted by the Director.”

However, according to Section 1209.3 you cannot lock to the following:

- (a) Fire hydrants;
- (b) Police and fire call boxes;
- (c) Electric traffic signal poles;
- (d) Stanchions or poles located within bus zones or stands;
- (e) Stanchions or poles located within twenty-five feet (25 ft.) of an intersection;
- (f) Trees under ten inches (10 in.) in diameter.

Where can I park a dockless bikeshare bike?

In Section 1209.6 it states that

“No person shall park a bicycle: (a) Upon a highway other than the roadway against the curb; or (b) Upon a sidewalk; except in a rack to support the bicycle, against a building, or at the curb in such a manner as to afford the least obstruction to pedestrian traffic.”

How do I request the removal of an abandoned bike?

Call 311 or fill out a service request at 311.dc.gov.

How long can a bike be parked in a public space?

Section 1209.1: “A person may secure a bicycle to a stanchion for a period of not more than twelve (12) consecutive hours, by means of a lock or similar device.”

How does someone request a bike rack?

Bike parking is an important amenity to provide for bicyclists. You can request a rack in public space by calling 311. More information is available at

waba.org/parking

BIKES ON METRORAIL

Bicycles are welcome on Metrorail at all times. During the week there is a limit of two bicycles per car. On weekends bikes are limited to four per car. Use good judgment and only board cars that can comfortably accommodate you and your bicycle. The middle cars are usually the most crowded, so consider boarding the first or last car of the train.

Guidelines

Follow these guidelines when bringing your bike on Metrorail:

- » Enter and exit through the first and last—not the center—doors of each car. In an emergency, place your bicycle on the seats and leave it on the train.
- » Senior citizens and people with disabilities always have priority. Make designated seating areas available if needed by another passenger.
- » Use the elevator at all times. Do not take bicycles on escalators. Avoid blocking doorways and aisles. Yield to other passengers.
- » All conventional operational bicycles, as well as tandem, electric-powered, and folding bicycles that are permitted (maximum size of 80" long, 48" high, and 22" wide).
- » Do not ride bicycles in stations, on platforms or trains. Keep both wheels on the ground and the kickstand up. Maintain control of your bicycle.

- » If you are under 16 years of age, you must be accompanied by an adult to travel Metrorail with a bicycle.

BIKES ON METROBUS

Bikes racks are available on the front of all Metro buses. For more information on bike access to other local transit systems and to learn how to use the bike racks on Metrobus, visit waba.org/metrobikes.

Guidelines

Follow these guidelines when bringing your bike on Metrobus:

- » Only regular bicycles are permitted (maximum size 80" long, 48" high and 22" side). No tricycles or training wheels are allowed.
- » Folded bicycles are allowed aboard Metrobus as long as they remain folded and inside a sturdy (e.g. nylon, canvas, leather) carrying case or bag.



WHAT TO DO IN CASE OF A BIKE CRASH

If you're hurt in a traffic crash, don't ride away or shake off what seems like a minor injury—you might find later that it's worse than you thought. Instead:

- » Call 911. If needed, get medical help immediately.
- » Gather as much of the information as you can for the form at right.
- » Get phone numbers of witnesses and the driver.
- » Write down how the crash happened while it's fresh in your memory.
- » Keep (or photograph) any damaged clothes or equipment.
- » Don't get mad at the scene. Keep a level head so you can ask questions and take notes.
- » If injured, don't move unless you're sure you won't hurt yourself more.

Call WABA at 202-518-0524 if you need assistance, and report your crash at **waba.org/crashtracker**.

Get This Info:

Driver, Vehicle, Insurance:

Driver's Name: _____

Driver's License #: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____

Make of Car: _____

License Plate #: _____

Insurance Company: _____

Policy #: _____

Witnesses:

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Name: _____

Phone: _____

Police:

Name: _____

Badge #: _____

Police Report #: _____

Crash notes:

What rights do I have if I am harassed or assaulted?

Assaulting a bicyclist is a crime and you should call the police. DC also has a civil cause of action for assault or harassment of bicyclists (DC Code § 50-1621) . For more information on this civil action, contact WABA through the crash tracker at **waba.org/crashtracker**.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

WABA

The mission of the Washington Area Bicyclist Association is to create a healthy, more livable region by promoting bicycling for fun, fitness, and affordable transportation; advocating for better bicycling conditions and transportation choices for a healthier environment, and educating children, adults, and motorists about safe bicycling.

Since 1972, WABA has been working tirelessly to make it easier and safer to ride for transportation and recreation. For more information on safe cycling tips, local bike maps and the bike laws of other areas, please visit **waba.org** or call us at 202-518-0524.



District Department of Transportation

District Department of Transportation's (DDOT) mission is to enhance the quality of life for District residents and visitors by ensuring that people, goods, and information move efficiently and safely, with minimal adverse impacts on residents and the environment. DDOT plans, designs, constructs, and maintains the District's streets, alleys, sidewalks, bridges, traffic signals, street lights, and bicycle facilities. For more information see www.ddot.dc.gov.

Metropolitan Police Department

One of the ten largest local police agencies in the United States, the MPDC is the primary law enforcement agency for the District of Columbia. Founded in 1861, the MPDC of today is on the forefront of technological crime fighting advances, from highly developed advances in evidence analysis to state-of-the-art-information technology. These modern techniques are combined with a contemporary community policing philosophy, referred to as Policing for Prevention. Community policing bonds the police and residents in a working partnership designed to organize and mobilize residents, merchants and professionals to improve the quality of life for all who live, work, and visit the Nation's Capital.

QUICK LINKS

- » Tips for reporting in the 311 system: **waba.org/311**
 - » Classes on riding in the city: **waba.org/classes**
 - » Report construction blocking a bike lane:
waba.org/blockedbikelane
 - » Report a bicycle crash: **waba.org/crashtracker**
 - » DC Bike Maps are available at the WABA office
(2599 Ontario Rd NW) and most area bike shops.
-

CONTACT INFORMATION

WABA

waba.org | (202) 518-0524 |
advocacy@waba.org | @WABADC

DDOT

ddot.dc.gov | 311 | ddot@dc.gov | @DDOTDC

MPD

mpdc.dc.gov | 911 | @DCPoliceDept

Please note: this guide is informational, and not a substitute for legal advice.



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