



featuring

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We can stop sacrificing pedestrians

Complete streets necessary to prevent pedestrian death toll

In October 2021, a 17-year-old high school student was crossing at the intersection of Danforth Avenue and Birchmount Road in the Toronto suburb of Scarborough around lunch hour. A 40-year-old driver in a minivan turned left and struck her. She died shortly after.

In January 2018, a 21-year-old woman got off the bus at an isolated bus stop on Steeles Avenue, on Scarborough's northern border. Her home was in a subdivision across the street, but there was no signalized crossing for hundreds of metres. She tried to cross directly but was struck and killed by a vehicle.

These are just two of the over 300 pedestrians killed by road violence in the past decade in Toronto, deaths that rarely get much attention.

Occasionally, a fatal collision triggers some kind of specific change.

Pedestrian blood sacrifice

When I moved into a small condo in downtown Toronto in the early 2000s, it was on a side street in a former industrial area that was transforming into a residential one. The street to the north, Richmond West, was a fast, three-lane, one-way route out of downtown.

We, the new residents, asked for a safe way to cross it but were told that there weren't enough of us, and besides it was too close to another traffic light. A few years later, a young woman was

killed crossing at that intersection. A traffic light was finally installed not long after.

I call this the "pedestrian blood sacrifice." Want a traffic safety measure in your neighbourhood? Sacrifice the life of a pedestrian and you just might get it. But generally, our society seems to accept the regular killing of pedestrians as the price we pay for the convenience of having invented the motor vehicle.

For the past few decades, the total number of people killed in traffic collisions in North America has been going down. And, until a decade ago, pedestrians benefitted from this decline along with drivers. But in the last 10 years, while people in cars have continued to suffer fewer deaths thanks to improved safety measures, the number of people who are killed by a vehicle when they are walking is no longer decreasing.

In the United States, the number of pedestrians killed has increased by almost 50 percent in the past decade. In Canada, it has remained steady, at a bit over 300 a year, even while other traffic deaths have decreased. But local numbers vary – in Toronto, the number of deaths roughly doubled in the early part of the decade, from a low of 18 in 2011 to an average of almost 39 between 2013 and 2019 (followed by a drop during the pandemic). In Montreal, they jumped significantly toward the end of the decade.

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The real cause of pedestrian deaths

One knee-jerk reaction is to blame the victims. It's often said that pedestrians are being distracted by their phones and are not paying attention as they cross the street, putting themselves in danger.

In fact, when Global News looked at the statistics in Toronto, the numbers showed no increase in the extremely small number of pedestrians who were distracted when they were hit. By contrast, the same Global News study showed that the number of distracted drivers involved in a collision has climbed steadily in lockstep with the increase in access to mobile phones.

Distracted driving, unlike distracted walking, is a candidate for being one of the causes of continuing pedestrian fatalities.

But there's another cause that is more clearly significant. Over the past decade, the number of light trucks and SUVs has increased steadily, while the number of cars – especially smaller ones – has decreased.

The correlation between the increase in trucks and SUVs and the increase in pedestrian fatalities is striking.¹ Significantly, the causal link is also clear. Because trucks and SUVs have higher hoods, they are more likely to hit a pedestrian in their most vulnerable mid-section and drag a pedestrian under the vehicle rather than knock them onto the hood of the car when they're hit.² Both of these factors make it more likely that the pedestrian will die.

Any such trend can be the result of a combination of causes, however, and other factors may also be affecting these numbers. Seniors are consistently over-represented among pedestrian fatalities, because they are frailer – the same force of impact is more likely to be fatal for them than for younger people. As the average age of the population goes up, and without more measures to improve traffic safety, the proportion of people struck by vehicles who are seniors is

likely to increase, and with that the number of deaths.

In Toronto, meanwhile, where pedestrian deaths shot up in the early part of the 2010s,³ a Global News investigation revealed that Toronto Police Services significantly reduced enforcement of traffic laws in the city during the same period. Drivers realizing they could get away with dangerous behaviour could well have contributed to increased fatalities.

Traffic safety is a choice

These deaths are not some inevitable side-effect of our transportation system. They are the result of choices made by our society about what goals we prioritize and where we invest our resources. We have made a choice to prioritize the rapid movement of motor vehicles. But it doesn't have to be like that – we could make our streets much safer while still enjoying the benefits of driving.

Vision Zero is a traffic safety philosophy first developed in Sweden whose goal is to eliminate traffic deaths and serious injuries. At the heart of this philosophy is the principle that humans will, inevitably, make mistakes, and that it's the role of the traffic system to ensure that those mistakes do not have serious consequences.

With that in mind, the key focus of Vision Zero is changing infrastructure so that streets are safe. First and foremost, that means that traffic moves at a slower pace.

Studies have shown that pedestrians hit by cars traveling at 30 kilometres an hour are likely to survive, as are most (but not as many) pedestrians struck at 40 kilometres an hour. But by the time a car is moving at 50 kilometres an hour, almost all pedestrians hit will be killed. This is referred to as the "running into a tree" effect – humans have evolved to be able to run into a tree at full speed and survive. Beyond human speed, we cannot cope with the impact.

PEDESTRIANS, cont'd on p. 44

- 1 Keith Barry, "NHTSA Too Slow in Response to Surging Pedestrian Fatalities, Federal Watchdog Says," *Consumer Reports*, April 30, 2020, <https://www.consumerreports.org/car-safety/nhtsa-too-slow-in-fight-against-surging-pedestrian-fatalities-federal-watchdog-says/>.
- 2 Jingwen Hu and Kathleen D. Klinich (July 2012), "Toward Designing Pedestrian-Friendly Vehicles," University of Michigan: Transportation Research Institute, <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/handle/2027.42/92202/102873.pdf>.
- 3 Ian Dennis Miller, "Pedestrian and Cyclist Death Rates: a Comparison between several Major Cities," October 16, 2016, <https://iandennismiller.github.io/road-safety/>.

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PEDESTRIANS, cont'd from p. 34

As any driver knows from experience, it's not enough to just change the speed limits (although studies show that does help a little⁴). Managing speed is about setting expectations through the design of the street. Fewer and narrower lanes, tight intersections, raised intersections (where the crosswalk, or the whole intersection, is raised to near sidewalk level), and streets with a lot of activity and variety, including street trees, have all been shown to discourage speeding.

Challenges in transforming streets

Infrastructure changes can be reinforced with education and enforcement, such as speed cameras, but it's vital to understand that those will never be enough in themselves as long as our roads are built for speed.

The biggest challenge for North American cities is that most of our cities have been built – and continue to be built – along the suburban model that sees the primary role of arterial roads as moving vehicles quickly. Such wide, fast roads are pedestrian death traps – the width of the road increases the exposure of pedestrians as they cross, and the speed makes it more likely that impacts will be fatal.

As well, such roads tend to be “safe crossing deserts” – there may be no signalized place to cross for a kilometre or more between major intersections, leaving pedestrians who want to cross in-between to take their chances on dangerous mid-block crossings. These suburban arterials – like the ones in Scarborough discussed above – are consistently the deadliest to pedestrians in our cities. It's easy to imagine that there aren't pedestrians in these kinds of areas, but in fact there are many.

People of lower socio-economic status – often recent immigrants and racialized people – may not have access to vehicles when they need them and are more likely to be walking. Add to that children, people who are disabled, and seniors who cannot drive, and it is the marginalized who are most likely to be exposed to traffic danger.

When it comes to children, an easy place to start is walking to school – which has declined significantly in recent decades. This is, in part, the result of a vicious circle where parents feel walking is unsafe, and therefore drive their children, adding their vehicle to the dangers. It takes a concerted effort to turn this trend around, but it is possible, with programs like:

- walking school buses (where adults accompany groups of children to school);
- school streets (where the street in front of a school is car-free when children are starting and ending the school day); and
- Montreal's School Safety Program (which makes focused safety changes to the streets around schools).

Ultimate solution to preventing pedestrian death toll

While much of the work of transforming streets is municipal, other governments also have a role to play.

Provinces can change planning standards to make sure new subdivisions are safe and walkable and can institute “vulnerable road user” laws that mandate license suspensions, re-education, and other penalties for drivers who kill or injure pedestrians (currently, they often just pay a fine). The federal government can mandate that pedestrian safety be incorporated into vehicle design, such as minimizing hood size.

The ultimate solution to preventing the annual death toll of pedestrians is to reimagine our streets for everyone – what is sometimes called “complete streets.”⁵ Narrower roadways, more signalized crossing points, wider sidewalks, tight intersections, bike lanes, and other transformations can create streets that are slower and safer. We need to not only transform existing streets, but also rethink how we create new streets as suburbs are built out.

These measures would slow down movement by motor vehicles a bit, certainly, but they won't stop them. A few extra minutes of driving is surely worth it to save lives. **MW**

4 Liraz Fridman, Rebecca Ling, Linda Rothman, et. al., “Effect of reducing the posted speed limit to 30 km per hour on pedestrian motor vehicle collisions in Toronto, Canada – a quasi-experimental, pre-post study,” *BMC Public Health*, 20, article no. 46 (February 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-019-8139-5>.

5 University of Toronto: Scarborough, “Complete Streets Project,” <https://www.utscc.utoronto.ca/suburban-mobilities/complete-streets-project>.