

A New Vision For Curbing Pedestrian Deaths

Recent headlines for 2015 paint a grim safety picture for pedestrians in the DC metro area:

- At Least A Dozen Pedestrians Have Perished In Fatal Crashes In Montgomery County This Year.ⁱ
- Two Pedestrians Killed Within a Two-Day Period on Roadways in the County [Montgomery].ⁱⁱ
- 843 People died Walking in the DC Region in the Last Ten Years.ⁱⁱⁱ
- One Person a Week Killed in D.C. Area.^{iv}

Other traffic gauges offer no more reassurance. In 2015, the DC metro area was rated as number one in the country for metro areas with the worst traffic gridlock problem.^v The DC Metro Area also placed number thirty five in 2014 on the list of fifty metro areas with the worst Pedestrian Danger Index [PDI] as measured by The National Complete Streets Coalition and Smart Growth America in their report *Dangerous by Design 2014*.^{vi} The PDI is based on the share of local commuters who walk to work and the most recent five years of data on pedestrian deaths. This gives an overall indication of the likelihood a person on foot being hit by a car and killed in separate metro areas.

Wendy Leibowitz of Action for Transit, a grassroots, metro area, transportation, advocacy group, has some firm opinions on what action needs to be taken. She states, *"..right turns on red must be eliminated, particularly around school zones. Drivers turning right on red are looking left for oncoming traffic, and not looking right for pedestrians or cyclists crossing right in front of them.*

“...The roads are built for speed and favor cars. We need structural changes to make cyclists and pedestrians more visible---clearly marked sidewalks, flashing lights at night and neon signage....Speed limits at 20 mph during school hours [twenty is plenty]...”.

“...Stop blaming the victims! Yes, we pedestrians and cyclists need to wear bright colors and focus. Drivers shouldn’t change the radio station or turn around to talk to children in the back seat. But you know what? We’re human. And we’re all going to be distracted by our thoughts and our children...And our roads and cross walks should allow for that, much more than they currently do...” .^{vii}



But a new approach to stopping pedestrian traffic deaths called “Vision Zero” addresses her concerns. The core principals behind this concept are:

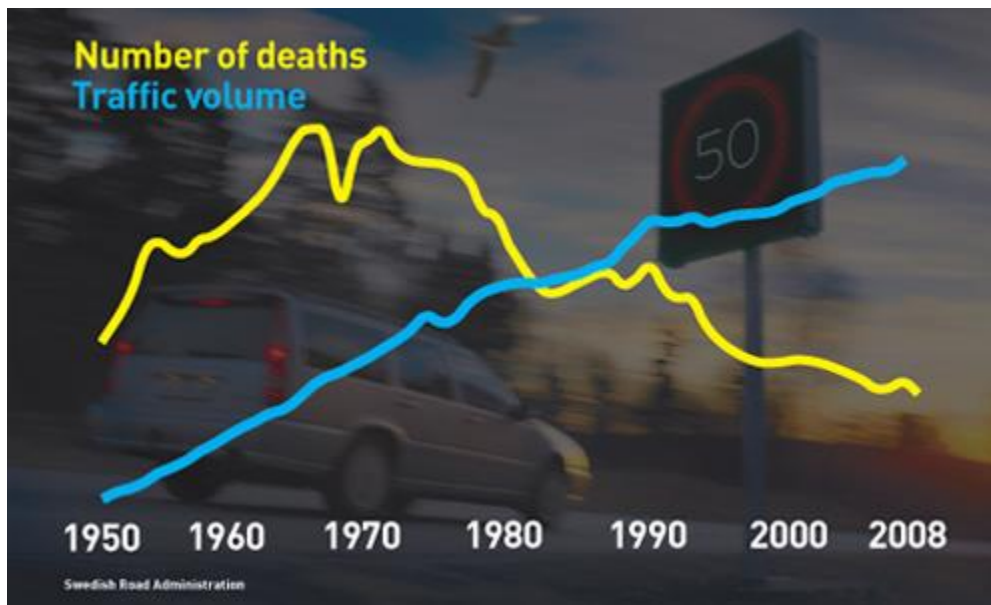
- Ethics: Human life and health are paramount and take priority over mobility and other objectives of the road traffic system.
- Responsibility: providers and regulators of the road traffic system share responsibility with the users.
- Safety: road traffic systems should take account of human fallibility and minimize the both the opportunities for errors and the harm done when they occur.
- Mechanisms for Change: providers and regulators must do their utmost to guarantee the safety of all citizens; they must cooperate with road users; and all three must be ready to change to achieve safety.^{viii}

These principals have translated into the following concrete actions by governments implementing this program:

- Speed limits for pedestrian crossings no higher than 30 mph, the maximum speed collision a human can be reasonably expected to survive.
- Increased crash barriers separating opposing traffic, limited access, and grade separation.
- Placing pedestrian crosswalks in safer spots.
- Reducing the number of traffic lanes in the most dangerous streets to slow down traffic.
- More speeding cameras installed to catch drivers travelling above the speed limit.^{ix}

In 1997, Sweden became the first country to implement a nationwide “Vision Zero” program. The stated goal of the program was to reduce all pedestrian traffic-related deaths and serious injuries to zero by the year 2020. Sweden decided that

the amount of traffic deaths were too great, so it began to base every transportation design, construction and enforcement decision around a basic premise: “will it help reduce Sweden’s total traffic deaths to zero?”. The table below charts the country’s progress:



This chart plots the traffic volume in Sweden [blue line] versus the number of traffic related deaths [yellow line] in the period between 1950 and 2008. The bottom line is that even though the overall traffic volume has increased, since the mid-nineties traffic fatalities have declined. Now, only three of every 100,000 Swedes die in crashes each year. This compares with 5.5 per 100,000 across the European Union, and 11.4 in America. Sweden’s roads are the safest in the world. America has over three times as many per capita fatalities. Since Vision Zero was put into effect in 1997, there has been a more than 30 percent

drop in pedestrian fatalities even though overall traffic volume has been increasing.^x

Other European countries are following suit. *The Campaign For Safe Road Design* was formed by 13 United Kingdom major road safety stakeholders, [government agencies, private business, and grassroots pedestrian groups], which called on the government to invest in safe road infrastructure that could potentially cut deaths on British roads by 33%.^{xi} Northern Ireland's Department of Environment has adopted a "Share the road to zero" policy for zero road deaths.^{xii} The Dutch have recently introduced the idea that roads should be "forgiving" or designed to lessen the outcome of a traffic collision when the inevitable does occur.^{xiii}

Coming to America.

The Vision Zero concept is not strictly limited to Europe; various American cities are in the middle of implementing some form of this program. First-term New York City Mayor Bill De Blasio's administration announced a Vision Zero program in Mid-2014. It consisted mainly of increased enforcement, improved signage, and reduced 25 mph speed limits at dangerous intersections.^{xiv} San Francisco also implemented a version of Vision Zero.^{xv} The City of Tampa, Florida is considering adopting it. So far, twelve cities in the US have adopted some form of the Vision Zero program.^{xvi}

Closer to home, in 2015, DC became the latest area city to adopt the Vision Zero program. Mayor Muriel Bowser stated,

“We want to focus on the engineering of our roadways and facilities. We want to focus on enforcement efforts and on education efforts. That is how you get streets safer, the three E’s.”^{xvii} Specifically, the DC plans call for more road enforcement, and education safety outreach efforts for the most vulnerable of DC pedestrians, more data collection efforts to identify the interventions that have the greatest potential to alleviate potentially fatal pedestrian crossings, and, once those interventions are identified through data analysis, applying the engineering and infrastructures fixes.^{xviii} Washington Area Bicyclist Association Director Shane Farthing stated, “A big part of Vision Zero is not blaming the people who are making the mistakes that lead to crashes but recognizing the limitations of the human mind to process all of the complexity of the urban environment and designing that environment so it is simpler and safer.”^{xix}

DC appears to be the leader in the metro area as far as implementing Vision Zero legislation. As of this date, there is no concrete legislation before the Alexandria City Council or the county councils of Arlington, Fairfax, Montgomery, or Prince George’s Counties. Which is not to say that there is not the hunger at the grass roots in these areas for more pedestrian safety measures.

Three NYC Intersections—Before and After Vision Zero. Can You Spot the Differences?



xx

Pros and Cons.

Support for the Vision Zero is hardly unanimous; it does have its critics. Some recent news stories claim that even after New York City has adopted some form of the program, pedestrian traffic deaths have not significantly declined. Advocates claim the mixed track record is due to the fact that the increased traffic safety measures have not been fully implemented.^{xxi} On the other

hand, San Francisco's Vision Zero program, enacted in 2014, has been seen as a success so far. Their safety initiatives, ranging from painted sidewalk extensions to new traffic signals and redesigned streets, may well have been factors in bringing pedestrian deaths down from 21 killed in 2013 to only 12 in 2015.^{xxii} If this trend continues, the City will be successful in meeting its stated goal of zero pedestrian traffic deaths by 2024.

Whatever the public's viewpoint on this issue may be, should they see Vision Zero as necessary to lower pedestrian deaths or as an unnecessary regulatory overreach, one thing seems clear; more and more DC metro governments in the near future will be considering some form of these safety proposals in response to the rising public clamor over pedestrian deaths and injuries.

ⁱ "At Least A Dozen Pedestrians Have Perished in Fatal Crashes in Montgomery County This Year", AAA Mid-Atlantic New Release, October 23, 2015, <http://connectedcommunities.us/showthread.php?t=73539>.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Blynn, Kelly, "843 People Died Walking in the DC Region in the Last Ten Years", <http://greaterwashington.org>, May 23, 2014.

^{iv} Dildane, David "One Pedestrian a Week Killed in D.C. Area", WTOP, January 26, 2015, <http://wtop.com/sprawl-crawl/2015/01/one-pedestrian-killed-per-week-d-c-area/>.

^v "DC Tops List of Nation's Worst Traffic Gridlock", WTOP, August 26, 2015, <http://wtop.com/dc/2015/08/d-c-tops-list-nations-worst-traffic-gridlock/>

^{vi} "Dangerous by Design 2014, Smart Growth America, National Complete Streets Coalition, May 2014, page five, <http://www.smartgrowthamerica.org/documents/dangerous-by-design-2014/dangerous-by-design-2014.pdf>.

^{vii} Leibowitz, Wendy, Interviewed by Glenn Daigon, via email on November 22, 2015.

^{viii} "Vision Zero", Wikipedia, Accessed 2015-11-20, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vision_Zero.

^{ix} <http://visionzero.episerverhotell.net/en/solutions/>, accessed on November 23, 2015.

^x [http://visionzero.episerverhotell.net/PublicDownloads/Presentations/Long%20presentation%20\(1.6MB\).pdf](http://visionzero.episerverhotell.net/PublicDownloads/Presentations/Long%20presentation%20(1.6MB).pdf)., accessed on November 23, 2015.

^{xi} “Campaign for Safe Road Design”, Wikipedia, accessed 2015-11-20, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Campaign_for_Safe_Road_Design.

^{xii} <https://www.sharetheroadtozero.com/>, accessed 2015-11-20.

^{xiii} “Vision Zero”, Wikipedia, accessed 2015-11-20, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vision_Zero.

^{xiv} Gelinas, “New York’s Next Public Safety Revolution”, *City Journal*, Spring, 2014, http://www.city-journal.org/2014/24_2_ny-reckless-driving.html.

^{xv} Cabanatuan, Michael, “S.F. on Track to Meet Vision Zero Safety Campaign Goals”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 17, 2015.

^{xvi} Loon, Jake Van, “New Effort Aims for Zero Pedestrian, Bicycle Deaths In Tampa”, *The Tampa Tribune*, October 29, 2015, <http://www.tbo.com/news/transportation/new-effort-aims-for-zero-pedestrian-bicycle-deaths-in-tampa-20151029/>.

^{xvii} Di Caro, Martin, “New Goal Set for D.C.: Totally Eliminate Pedestrian Deaths”, WAMU, March 3, 2015, http://wamu.org/news/15/03/03/dc_to_embrace_goal_of_totally_eliminating_pedestrian_deaths.

^{xviii} <http://www.dcvisionzero.com/action-plan.html#ourgoal>, accessed on November 26, 2015.

^{xix} Ibid.

^{xx} <http://thisoldcity.com/policy/postcard-new-amsterdam-vision-zero-new-york%E2%80%99s-commitment-safer-streets-fewer-deaths#.VlZr4narSM8>, accessed on November 30, 2015.

^{xxi} Hicks, Nolan “Daily News Probe Finds Mixed Results for Bill de Blasio’s Vision Zero Plan”, *New York Daily News*, May 26, 2015.

^{xxii} Cabanatuan, Michael, “S.F. on Track to Meet Vision Zero Safety Campaign Goals”, *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 17, 2015.