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The Path to Reducing Pedestrian Deaths Is Steep but Straight

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Last year, according to the Governors Highway Safety Association, more than 7,500 pedestrians were killed while walking on U.S. roadways. Between 2010 and 2021, in fact, pedestrian deaths rose 77 percent, to 7,624 from an annual total of 4,302. This increase has taken us to a 40-year high for pedestrian fatalities.

There are no numbers yet for 2023, but a cursory look at articles in cities, counties and other localities across the country — "Pedestrian deaths have quadrupled in Durham," reads a story published this week by a North Carolina news outlet — suggests that we're in for another year of record pedestrian deaths.

Who or what is to blame for this terrible increase in pedestrian fatalities? For starters, there is the proliferation of bigger and heavier trucks and S.U.V.s, which may pose a growing menace to pedestrians and bicyclists. These vehicles, which often dwarf the size of their predecessors, are harder to control and have large blind zones in the front or rear, making them much more difficult to operate in busy or crowded areas.

And then there's physics. In a 2020 study of pedestrian crashes in Michigan, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety found that at residential and city speeds of 20 to 39 miles per hour, 30 percent of crashes with S.U.V.s resulted in pedestrian fatalities, compared with 23 percent for cars. At 40 miles per hour or higher, all crashes with the S.U.V. killed the pedestrians, while just over half the crashes with cars resulted in pedestrian fatalities.

It is difficult to overstate just how much the design of modern trucks and S.U.V.s threatens pedestrian safety. These vehicles have tall hoods — which make it impossible to see obstacles directly in front of the driver — and longer braking distances.

If you are unlucky enough to be hit by a midsize sedan going 25 miles per hour, the point of impact will most likely be your legs, causing you to flip onto the hood. If you are unlucky enough to be hit by a Chevrolet Silverado — one of the most popular truck models in the United States — the point of impact for an adult will most likely be the torso; a child will be crushed outright.

In addition to the kinds of vehicles on the road, there's the fact that many roads are not safe to walk on, with few sidewalks or anything to create a barrier between pedestrians and vehicles. When coupled with an increase in speeding and a decrease in traffic enforcement, it is a recipe for more pedestrian deaths.

It almost goes without saying that pedestrian deaths are unevenly distributed among groups. The reason is simple: Pedestrian infrastructure is often worst in places that are most disadvantaged. Compared with more affluent neighborhoods, these communities have fewer parks, sidewalks, marked crosswalks and other measures to calm traffic. They are also more

likely to have wider roads and sparse streetscapes, which encourage speeding. People walking in low-income neighborhoods are more likely to be struck and killed than people walking in higher-income areas, and Native and Black Americans are more likely to die while walking than any other group.

Ideally, no one would die while walking or riding a bike. Unfortunately, the path to drastically reducing pedestrian deaths is a steep one. It would require our cities to completely rethink their vehicle and pedestrian infrastructure, with an emphasis on reducing traffic speeds and redesigning streets to force drivers to slow down. It would require big, new investments in transit and public transportation to allow those who don't want to drive to stay off the road. It would require new policies, like vehicle weight taxes, to penalize the purchase of large trucks and S.U.V.s. And it would require effective traffic enforcement, such as the use of automated traffic cameras, which have been shown to reduce the number of vehicle crashes and deaths from speeding, and swift, certain and meaningful penalties for habitual offenders.

America's City Councils, city planners and traffic engineers would, in short, have to prioritize safety over speed and the efficient movement of vehicles. It's the only way to stop what is an epidemic of violence, touching the hundreds of thousands of Americans who have lost friends and loved ones to crashes and road accidents. I, for one, am tired of reading story after story of men, women and children being struck and killed by cars and trucks.

In the meantime, those of us who drive can exercise some personal responsibility. We can put our phones down. We can keep our eyes on the road. And we can try our best not to speed. A few extra seconds, a few extra minutes, isn't worth a life — either someone else's or our own.

What I Wrote

My Tuesday column was on what the rise of Jim Jordan says about the present state of the Republican Party.

> What's become clear of late, in the midst of the chaos that has left the House without a speaker at a particularly fraught moment in foreign and domestic affairs, is that Republicans are as unable to organize themselves as they are incapable of leading the affairs of state.

My Friday column was a look at the Republican Party dynamics that produce politicians like Jordan.

> It is not simply that the Republican Party has politicians like Jim Jordan and Matt Gaetz and Marjorie Taylor Greene. It's that the Republican Party is practically engineered to produce politicians like Jim Jordan and Matt Gaetz and Marjorie Taylor Greene. And there's no brake — no emergency off switch — that might slow or stop the car. The one thing that might get the Republican Party back on the rails is a major and unanticipated shift in the structure of American politics that forces it to adapt to new voters, new constituencies and new conditions.

And on Tuesday, I spoke with MSNBC's Alex Wagner about the chaos in the House of Representatives.

Now Reading

Sarah Schulman on the manufacturing of consent for New York magazine.

A conversation with Noura Erakat, a Palestinian American human rights lawyer, in Boston Review.

Kasia Boddy on the census for The London Review of Books.

Daniel Immerwahr on the myth of rural America for The New Yorker.

Amanda Mull on self-checkout kiosks for The Atlantic.
