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THE TRANSPORT POLITIC

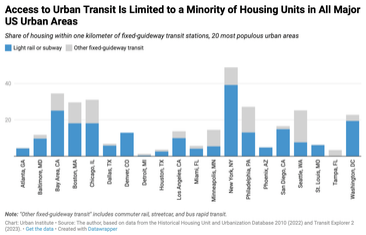
2023's Transit Investments

Over the past year, I've been hard at work in my position at the Urban Institute in Washington, DC, conducting new research on transportation—as well as land use, affordable housing, and urban planning. I've also been working on updates to Transit Explorer to bring it closer to the goal of mapping out all of the world's fixed-guideway transit systems in one place. I just released my annual list of major projects opening this year or that are under construction.

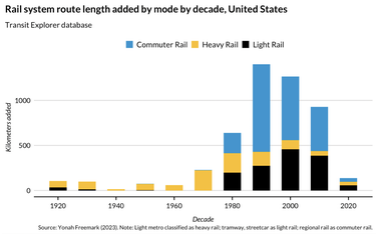
In this newsletter, check out some of my analysis of the Transit Explorer database, showing what cities are building around the world—and which have a little more work to do to get more transit to more people. I've also linked below to some of the recent transportation research I've led at the Urban Institute and that might be of interest.

– Yonah Freemark

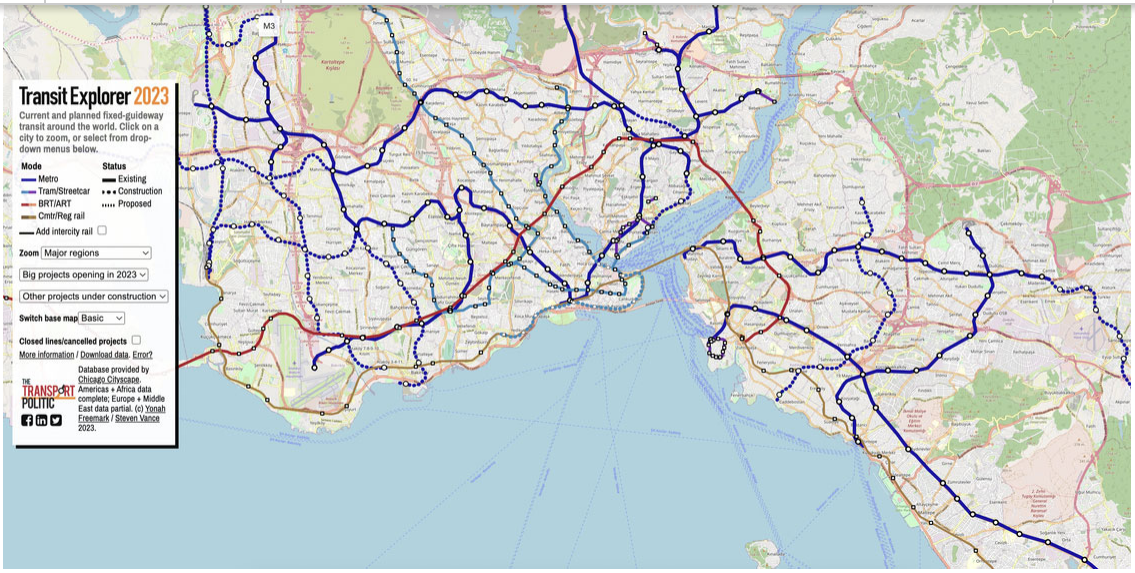
Openings and Construction Starts Planned for 2023



Federal Infrastructure Funds Could Fill Gaps in Local Transit Accessibility



Historical Trends Show a Decline in Investment in High–Quality Transit in the US—And an Uptick Elsewhere

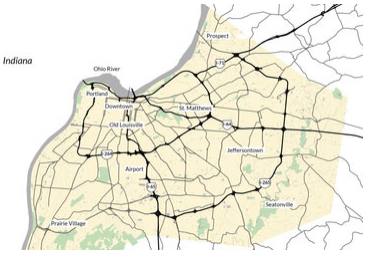


Transit Explorer, the world's largest resource of fixed-guideway transit data, has been expanded to encompass more data than ever. In addition to North America, Africa, and Western Europe, it now includes South America, plus metro systems in all of Europe and parts of the Middle East. Check it out!

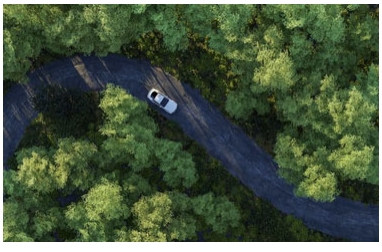
Access the Transit Explorer Interactive Database

Download Transit Explorer Data

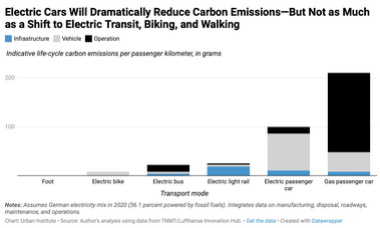
Recent transportation research at the Urban Institute



The Polluted Life Near the Highway: A Review of National Scholarship and a Louisville Case Study

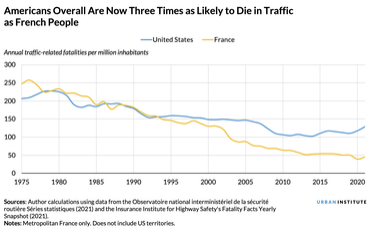


Regulations to Respond to the Potential Benefits and Perils of Self-Driving Cars



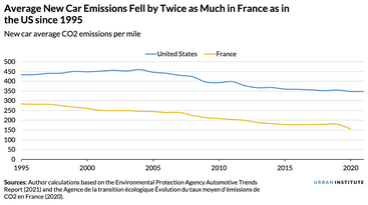
What the Inflation Reduction Act Did, and Didn't Do, for Sustainable Transportation

Urban Institute series on car weight, pollution, and automotive fatalities



With US Traffic Fatalities Rising, What Would It Take to Save Lives?

In the US, Could Taxing Heavy Cars Be a First Step toward Reducing Pedestrian Fatalities?



With Carbon Emissions Higher Than Ever, Can We Tax Polluting Cars to Reduce Vehicle Pollution?

THE TRANSPORT POLITIC

← NEWS

NHTSA Estimates for First Nine Months of 2022 Suggest Roadway Fatalities Beginning to Level Off After Two Years of Dramatic Increases

January 9, 2023 | Washington, DC

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has released its latest projections for traffic fatalities in 2022, estimating that 31,785 people died in traffic crashes in the first nine months of the year. This is a 0.2% decrease as compared to the 31,850 estimated fatalities during the same time in 2021.

Americans continue to drive more than during the height of the pandemic, with preliminary Federal Highway Administration data showing a 1.6% increase in vehicle miles traveled, or about 39 billion miles. As a result, the estimated fatality rate for the first nine months of 2022 decreased to 1.30 fatalities per 100 million vehicle miles traveled, down from the projected rate of 1.32 fatalities during the same time in 2021.

NHTSA projects that fatalities declined slightly in the third quarter of 2022, making this the second straight quarterly decline in fatalities after seven consecutive quarters of year-to-year increases in fatalities. Those increases began in the third quarter of 2020.

While fatalities overall declined, fatalities amongst cyclists and pedestrians continued to rise.

“Fatalities have not increased for two quarters now, but we have far more work to do to save lives and address the crisis on our nation’s roadways. That means investing in safety, implementing strategies that work, and embracing the safe system approach outlined in the Department’s National Roadway Safety Strategy. We urge everyone to do their part by driving safely and watching out for others on the road, especially vulnerable road users like pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists,” said NHTSA Acting Administrator Ann Carlson.

NHTSA estimates that for the first three quarters of 2022, fatalities increased in 25 states, stayed unchanged in one state, and decreased in 24 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico.

NHTSA also released a new report, “Early Estimates of Motor Vehicle Traffic Fatalities and Fatality Rate by Sub-Categories Through June 2022.” The report shows a mixture of increases and decreases across the sub-categories.

As compared to the first half of 2021, fatalities decreased:

- 10% in children younger than 16
- 10% on urban collector and local roads
- 9% in vehicle rollover crashes
- 8% in people ages 16 to 24
- 7% in crashes involving passengers ejected from a vehicle
- 7% in unbelted people in passenger vehicles
- 2% in speeding-related crashes

As compared to the first half of 2021, fatalities increased:

- 12% on rural interstates
- 10% in crashes involving at least one large truck
- 8% among cyclists
- 5% among motorcyclists
- 2% among pedestrians

The Department's actions on roadway safety are guided by the National Roadway Safety Strategy, which outlines the Department's comprehensive approach to significantly reducing serious injuries and deaths on highways, roads and streets. President Biden's Bipartisan Infrastructure Law provides unprecedented funding for safety to achieve the Department's ambitious, long-term goal of reaching zero roadway fatalities.

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Where ‘Vision Zero’ Is Working

A dramatic reduction in traffic deaths in US cities is possible, despite huge headwinds. In some places, progress is starting to become visible.

By
Angie Schmitt
November 25, 2022 at 1:03 PM EST

When I was a reporter at the transportation advocacy publication Streetsblog, we used to do a little data exercise looking at places that had declared themselves “Vision Zero cities.” Vision Zero is an international safety campaign that aims to completely eliminate traffic fatalities and injuries. Like other journalists, we tried to determine if these civic pledges made any detectable difference in the number of roadway deaths.

At the time, in 2018 and 2019, it was very hard to tell. The data was noisy, especially at the city level. A lot of cities treated Vision Zero more as a declaration than the kind of radical change in policy it demands. Some traffic safety advocates were skeptical of Vision Zero’s prospects for success. And as US traffic fatalities continued to grow during the Covid-19 pandemic, many have remained so.

But some solid evidence is now emerging that it is working, or can work.

A recent chart and report from the International Transport Forum is what gives me hope. In the report, “Monitoring Progress in Urban Road Safety,” the authors compare the decrease in road traffic deaths across 22 major cities that participated in a pledge to reduce traffic deaths. New York City is the only US city included, and one of just four where the city significantly outperformed national-level safety figures.

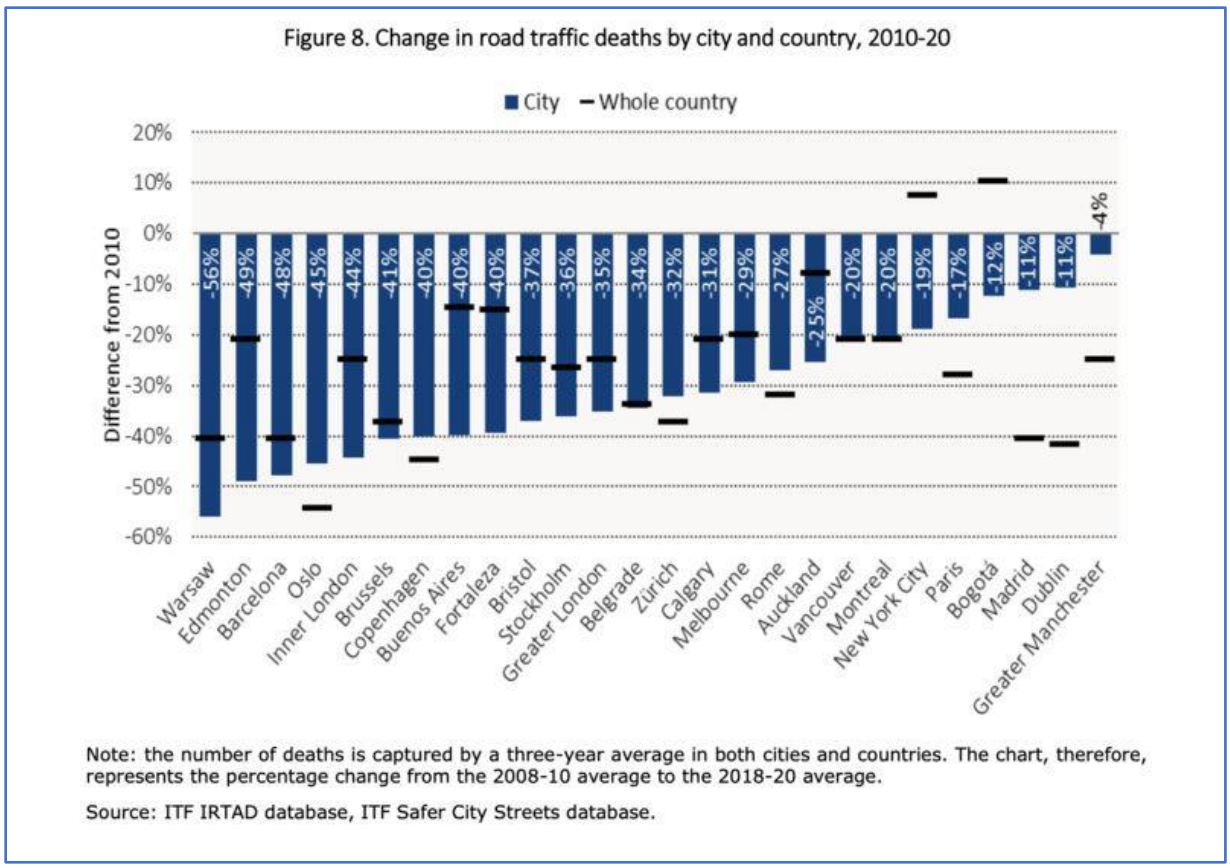

Chart courtesy of International Transport Forum

Between 2010 and 2020, NYC's traffic deaths fell 19%, while the US death rate rose 8% — an improvement that translates into a significant number of saved lives. And there is reason to believe that the city can do better now that the framework and the constituency for safety reforms is in place.

It's important to remember that, in the US, Vision Zero cities operate in a national environment of increased traffic deaths — especially for pedestrians, who are overrepresented in urban crashes. Nationally, thanks to a combination of factors — most importantly growth in SUVs and extra-large pickups — deaths of pedestrians have grown 62% nationally since 2009, according to the nonprofit advocacy organization Smart Growth America.

Now, New York City is a bit of a special case. With 9 million people, it's almost like a city-state, and its traffic department is more sophisticated and well-resourced than any other US municipality. Mayor Eric Adams

recently committed $3 billion to Vision Zero efforts. Other major cities like Phoenix and Houston — where traffic deaths have been soaring — devote fewer resources to the problem of traffic deaths.

New York City also benefits from the fact that it has a relatively walkable and transit-friendly built environment. Only about 50% of city households even own a car, which makes it especially fertile ground for pedestrian safety advocacy groups. Those organizations have fought for lower speed limits and recently won a state-level law change that will allow speed enforcement cameras to operate in many locations throughout the city 24 hours a day.

Reducing traffic deaths the way New York City did is a labor-intensive process that requires a lot of institutional capacity.

And New York City's comparative success has been tempered. The pandemic years have seen rising roadway death rates, as in so many other US cities. And also like many cities, it must deal with a state department of transportation whose programs are not always well aligned with Vision Zero objectives: Victims of traffic violence have to make regular pilgrimages to Albany to win safety measures like the ability to use speed cameras in school zones or lower speed limits.

Federal policy, too, is often not been well aligned with advocates' proposals. Even though Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg made a verbal commitment to the Vision Zero framework and announced a national roadway traffic safety strategy in January 2022, most federal transportation money flows to states, with few strings attached. States use that money to build the kind of arterial roads that are responsible for 63% of pedestrian deaths. These same state DOTs may then resist and overrule local efforts to improve safety.

So cities that adopt Vision Zero policies are battling not only national headwinds like larger and more dangerous passenger vehicles and cultural issues related to the pandemic that have contributed to reckless driving. They also are trying to create an entirely new framework for addressing a problem oftentimes against the systems in place at the more powerful and better resourced agencies handing down programs and policies.

Other success stories are starting to emerge. Hoboken, a small, densely populated city of 60,000 just outside NYC's borders, has achieved dramatic improvements in pedestrian safety thanks to a potentially widely replicable formula that has relied a lot on inexpensive intersection designs, particularly a practice called "daylighting" that improves visibility. Hoboken hasn't had a traffic death in four years. Nearby Jersey City has not had a single traffic fatality so far this year on non-state roads, and only five deaths on state roads. Advocacy group Safe Streets JC credits the city's progress with aggressive action on road diets, bike lanes and smaller scale interventions like curb bump-outs. By comparison, similarly sized Cincinnati has had 30 deaths so far this year.

That being said, I'm not suggesting anyone start taking a victory lap. Vision Zero cities like Washington, DC, Seattle and Portland, Oregon, are still seeing traffic deaths rise. Last year Portland had its highest total since 1990. In cities like Nashville and Columbus, Ohio, which have just started their Vision Zero journeys, the impact remains unclear.

Reducing traffic deaths the way New York City did is a labor-intensive process that requires a lot of institutional capacity. Cities need staff that can identify problem areas and then develop and implement cost-effective solutions — often against the background of a fair amount of controversy. There is also whole data management project associated with tracking progress and fine-tuning the approach.

The work is not necessarily any more complex, I suppose, than what goes into building a highway. But right now, it's still the exception rather than the rule; it has not yet been widely formalized into city government in a sustainable way.

Still, I think it should come as some comfort and inspiration to city workers, advocates and political leaders struggling to do this very difficult, but worthwhile thing. There is evidence that well-funded sustained investments in reducing traffic deaths can work, not just abroad but in the US. But until state and federal policies and funding align with this goal, city-led efforts to save lives will continue to be held back.

— Angie Schmitt is a writer and planning consultant and author of Right of Way: Race, Class and the Silent Epidemic of Pedestrian Deaths in America .