

Why Are American Drivers So Deadly?

After decades of declining fatality rates, dangerous driving has surged again.

By Matthew Shaer

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In the summer of 1999, a few years after graduating from medical school, Deborah Kuhls moved from New York to Maryland, where she had been accepted as a surgical fellow at the R Adams Cowley Shock Trauma Center in Baltimore. Founded by a pioneer in emergency medicine, Shock Trauma is one of the busiest critical-care facilities in the country — in an average year, doctors there see approximately 8,000 patients, many of them close to death.

Kuhls considered herself to be up for the challenge. At 31, she was substantially older than the typical resident — she had been a banker before she was a doctor — and steelier too, capable of operating with preternatural calm in even the most frenetic of circumstances. But her first few months at Shock Trauma tested her resolve. The center sees a particularly high proportion of the region's car- and motorcycle-crash victims, and not everyone can be saved. On bad days, it could seem as if as many patients were being revived as were being shipped down to the basement morgue.

At a residency at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in the Bronx, Kuhls had been taught how to handle what's known in the trade as penetrative trauma — stabbings, impalements, gunshots. Now she underwent an education in blunt-force injuries, which are often considerably harder to diagnose: A gunshot wound is its own clear evidence, in the form of a ragged perforation, of where the surgeon must focus his or her attention. But a body battered in a car crash tends to yield fewer clues — the damage can be invisible to the untrained eye.

"If you're going very fast, and then suddenly you're not, the floppy parts of your body — your intestines, your kidney, your liver — will keep going," Kuhls told me. "That's just plain physics." She went on: "And our brain is floating in our skull, surrounded by fluid. But what if the skull bounces around or the car roof caves in and connects with the driver's head? It might not look like it, but that person is probably bleeding to death internally. You don't have much time to save them."

At Shock Trauma, Kuhls worked alongside a surgeon named Carl Soderstrom, who was an unusually committed chronicler of data. When evaluating patients, he made it a point to collect information on everything from the size and scope of their wounds to the number of intoxicants percolating in their systems. "It was inspiring, because it added another dimension to the work we were doing," Kuhls says. "Like, here's a way to quantify the immense consequences of crashes. Here's how we can demonstrate the toll of an issue that had become extremely real to me." It was one thing, Kuhls believed, to talk about a rollover wreck that broke a 13-year-old girl's neck. It was another to be able to prove that dozens more children were being injured in similar crashes every year.

In 2000, Kuhls accepted a dual-track job as director of the trauma I.C.U. and assistant professor of surgery at the University of Nevada School of Medicine, in Las Vegas, and took her interest in data with her. Initially, she had to scrap for the funding to conduct some of her earliest surveys, including a study on the low usage of car seats in the local Hispanic community.

Reliance on publicly available information, like the year-end traffic injury and death report published by the state, would get her only so far, Kuhls discovered. The Department of Transportation typically provided few details on each crash or what might have caused it. "I got good at cold calling people and asking for whatever information they had," Kuhls told me. Few turned her down. Friendly staff members at trauma centers around Nevada gave her injury data; law-enforcement agencies sent her traffic-stop reports.

Gradually, a picture came into focus. Outside the tangle of streets that surround the Strip, many roads in the city are flat and fast and conducive to speeding, which remains a reliable predictor of the severity of injury. On slower roads, blown stop signs and red lights contributed to many of the serious wrecks, as did the proximity of pedestrians. But Kuhls could also see

what was working: When the city laced a series of footbridges over Las Vegas Boulevard, pedestrian deaths subsided. The addition of a stoplight could prevent a stretch of previously uninterrupted road from becoming a drag strip.

In aggregate, from 2010 to 2019, the number of serious injuries and deaths in Nevada subsided and then flatlined, more or less in line with national trends. Multiple airbags were standard on nearly every new vehicle, regardless of price, and backup cameras and lane-departure and blind-spot sensors were cheaper to produce. The improved technology meant that drivers not only had more peripheral awareness; they were more likely to survive crashes that might have killed the occupant of an older vehicle. “It all made sense to me — all the things that were supposed to be working were working,” Kuhls remembers. “But then things stopped making sense. Everything changed, radically, like someone had flipped a switch.”

In 2020, as Covid-19 rattled through the state, law enforcement and E.M.T. workers began reporting a large increase in road-related injuries, despite the lockdowns and the relative emptiness of the streets; in 2021, the state recorded 385 fatalities, a 15-year high. The following year was hardly much better, with 382 fatal crashes and a 114 percent increase in the number of cyclists killed on the road. (For public-messaging reasons, vehicular wrecks are almost never referred to by experts as “accidents,” wording that implies no culpability on the part of the participants.)

The cause was easy enough to identify: Data parsed by Kuhls and her colleagues showed that drivers were speeding more, on highways and on surface streets, and plowing through intersections with an alarming frequency. Conversely, seatbelt use was down, resulting in thousands of injuries to unrestrained drivers and passengers. After a decade of steady decline, intoxicated-driving arrests had rebounded to near historic highs.

“Drivers were frustrated,” says Kuhls, now a professor of surgery at the Kirk Kerkorian School of Medicine at U.N.L.V. and chief of trauma at an affiliated public hospital. “My own theory is that whatever personal conflicts they had were exacerbated because they’d been sheltering in place during Covid. So they’d get on the road having self-medicated with drugs or alcohol, or they’d just be incredibly reckless.”

In the fall of 2022, Kuhls attended the annual meeting of the Governors Highway Safety Organization, in Louisville, Ky. In conversations with other researchers, she learned that the same behavioral patterns she had observed back in Nevada were playing out in nearly every state in the country, often at record-shattering scale. From 2020 to 2021, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has since calculated, the number of crashes in the United States soared 16 percent, to more than six million, or roughly 16,500 wrecks a day. The fatality figures were somehow even worse: In 2021, 42,939 Americans died in car crashes, the highest toll in a decade and a half. Of those deaths, a sizable portion involved intoxicated or unrestrained drivers or vehicles traveling well in excess of local speed limits.

To Kuhls, it felt as if all the deadly habits that were on such flagrant display during the early months of the pandemic had become normalized. “We’ve all gotten stuck,” Kohls told me. “That’s true here; it’s true nationally. And it’s a scary thing to comprehend.”

Examine a chart of year-over-year car fatalities in the United States, and you’ll encounter two significant spikes — three, counting the one we are living through today. The first arrived in the earliest decades of the 20th century, as cities were overrun by hordes of untrained drivers; the second hit at the midcentury mark, with the creation of the freeway system and the introduction of powerful new vehicles like the Ford Mustang. In 1966 alone, the traffic death toll hit 50,894, more than the number of American troops killed in combat during the entire Vietnam War.

As early as the 1950s, doctors, activists and journalists had tried to raise concerns about the rising violence on American roads. Among them was Fletcher Woodward, a mild-mannered physician who toured the country ceaselessly, carting along a movie that depicted, in nausea-inducing detail, the effect car crashes had on an unprotected human body. (“When the automobile death rate ranks next to our main killers ... it is indeed time to answer Cain’s query and say: ‘Yes. I am my brother’s keeper,’” Woodward warned in 1957.) Few people paid much attention. It was the “golden age” of the Detroit auto industry and the heyday of American car culture — the era of drive-in movie theaters and drive-through restaurants. By

1958, 79 million cars had been registered in the United States, up from 40 million in 1950. “Popular acceptance and a ‘hands-off’ attitude by governments — state, local and federal — prevailed,” Michael Lemov, the former chief counsel of the Oversight and Investigations Subcommittee of the House of Representatives, later wrote.

The tipping point came in part with a pair of best-selling books: “Unsafe at Any Speed,” by the crusading young lawyer Ralph Nader, and “Safety Last,” a deftly reported exposé by Jeffrey O’Connell and Arthur Myers, which concluded that executives in the auto industry, collectively, “simply don’t feel there’s any money in safety.”

In the summer of 1966, after weeks of hearings, Congress passed the bill known today as the National Traffic and Motor Vehicle Safety Act, effectively shifting the responsibility for protecting drivers onto manufacturers, who were previously allowed to decide how much — and what type of — safety equipment was included in their cars. (A related bill also mandated the creation of the National Highway Safety Bureau, the predecessor to the modern National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.)

In coming years, all vehicles made in the United States would have to adhere to stringent federal standards, governing everything from the strength of a car’s roof and doors to the integrity of its ignition and fuel systems. Seatbelt laws followed, as did the introduction of airbags. From a peak in 1972, the number of annual roadway deaths nationwide slowly declined before bottoming out in 2011, when 32,479 Americans died in car wrecks, the lowest count in more than six decades. “One of my favorite ways to start presentations is to show this video from the Insurance Institute of Highway Safety, with a 1959 car and a 2009 car,” says Lee Vinsel, a professor at Virginia Tech and an expert on the history of automotive regulation. “In the video, they crash the two cars into each other, head on. And the upshot is that the passenger in the new car might come out with a broken leg, but the passenger in the older car is dead. You can literally see how far we’ve come — how much things shifted.”

And yet some victories prove more enduring than others. In 1966, at least, politicians were faced with an issue that could be comprehensively addressed by legislation: Vehicles were death traps because manufacturers had little incentive to make them otherwise. Our current predicament is considerably more complex. New cars are stronger and less prone to spontaneously exploding, but they’re also taller and heavier — pickup trucks have added an average of 1,300 pounds of curb weight since 1990, while the average full-size S.U.V. now weighs around 5,000 pounds, at least a thousand pounds more than the midcentury sedan. (Angie Schmitt, a transportation writer and planner, has called this the “truckification of the family car.”) In 1967, Chevrolet made headlines with its sleek new Corvette Stingray, which leaped to 60 miles per hour in 4.7 seconds; in 2023, dozens of midmarket sports cars and sedans can match or beat that time, and the Tesla Model S Plaid, with its stock “drag strip” mode, trounces it by a full 2.6 seconds.

The relationship between car size and injury rates is still being studied, but early research on the American appetite for horizon-blotting machinery points in precisely the direction you’d expect: The bigger the vehicle, the less visibility it affords, and the more destruction it can wreak. In a report published in November, the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, a nonprofit, concluded that S.U.V.s or vans with a hood height greater than 40 inches — standard-issue specs for an American truck in 2023 — are 45 percent more likely to kill pedestrians than smaller cars.

Forty-three percent of our 4.2 million miles of road, meanwhile, are in poor or mediocre condition, according to the American Society of Civil Engineers. And they’re unlikely to be repaired soon, given the \$786 billion construction backlog.

Above all, though, the problem seems to be us — the American public, the American driver. “It’s not an exaggeration to say behavior on the road today is the worst I’ve ever seen,” Capt. Michael Brown, a state police district commander in Michigan, told me. “It’s not just the volume. It’s the variety. There’s impaired driving, which constituted 40 percent of our fatalities last year. There are people going twice the legal limit on surface streets. There’s road rage,” Brown went on. “There’s impatience — right before we started talking, I got an email from a woman who was driving along in traffic and saw some guy fly by her off the roadway, on the shoulder, at 80, 90 miles an hour.” Brown stressed it was rare to receive such a message: “It’s got so bad, so extremely typical,” he said, “that people aren’t going to alert us unless it’s super egregious.”

In 2020 and 2021, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has calculated, approximately a quarter of all fatal wrecks in the United States involved vehicles traveling above the posted speed limit; a significant percentage of the dead, whether passenger or driver, were not wearing seatbelts. In line with the trends documented by Kuhls in Nevada — and observed firsthand by Brown in Michigan — national intoxicated-driving rates have surged to the extent that one in every 10 arrests is now linked to a suspected D.U.I. And aggressive driving, defined by AAA as “tailgating, erratic lane changing or illegal passing,” factors into 56 percent of crashes resulting in a fatality. (Distressingly, this statistic does not cover the tens of thousands of people injured, often critically, by aggressive drivers, or the 550 people shot annually after or during road-rage incidents — or the growing number of pedestrians and cyclists deliberately targeted by incensed motorists.)

Take the bad behavior and add the perils of distraction by smartphone — responsible, by one conservative estimate, for about 3,500 deaths annually — and you’re left with what Emily Schweninger, a senior policy adviser at the U.S. Department of Transportation, described to me as a “genuine public-health crisis” on the level of cancer, suicide and heart disease.

Perhaps you have sensed the growing dangers of the American road in the frequency of wrecks you spot on your daily commute. Perhaps you have felt it in the blood-pressure-raising presence of the truck that veers across three lanes of traffic and attaches itself to your rear bumper, chortling like a lunatic bull. And perhaps you have wondered, like Deborah Kuhls, if some cosmic switch has been flipped. But if so, how was it flipped — and why?

One clue lies in a sweeping annual survey commissioned by the American Psychological Association to explore what the authors call “the psychological impacts of a collective trauma” from the pandemic, “global conflicts, racism and racial injustice, inflation and climate-related disasters.” According to the report, titled “Stress in America,” just 34 percent of American adults have confidence in the direction the country is going, while a third of respondents said they had too much anxiety in their lives to think about the future at all. Nearly a half wished they had someone — anyone — who could help them manage a daily barrage of stressors.

“All those emotions, they have to go somewhere,” says Ryan Martin, a psychologist at the University of Wisconsin and a specialist in the science of anger. More often than not, Martin contends, we find that outlet in a car. “If I was to set out to create a situation that would make the most people act badly and angrily, I couldn’t come up with anything better than driving,” he says. “Every element that provokes an anger response is there. There’s your mood when you entered the car in a rush. There’s provocation — something that happens to you, like being cut off. And relatedly, there’s how you interpret the provocation based on your mood.”

Complicating matters, Martin argues, are what he calls the “unwritten rules of the road,” which tend to be subjective in nature and usually at cross-purposes with the actual statutory laws. “The other day,” Martin told me, “someone was tailgating me because I was only driving 45 in a zone marked for 40 miles per hour. That’s their decision about how fast I should be going. It’s not written down anywhere. But in their mind, they’re participating in all sorts of inflammatory labeling: I’m a fool, I’m an idiot, because I’m not adhering to their personal rules.”

Martin theorizes that drivers will often adjust the scale of their response based on the offending vehicle or the appearance of the person inside. A minivan may get a pass for cutting us off, “but let’s say it’s a big truck, and you’re progressive,” Martin went on. “You might think, ‘I bet that person’s conservative.’ You may or may not be right, but it’s what you’ll use for your appraisal of the situation.” In our worst moments, we can stop thinking of other drivers as people at all.

In the summer of 2022, Amanda Stephens, a senior researcher at the Accident Research Center at Monash University in Australia, was the lead author of a paper called “Self-Reported Changes in Aggressive Driving Within the Past Five Years and During Covid-19.” Most drivers, Stephens notes, were encountering more hostility on the roads than they did before the pandemic. Nearly 80 percent of respondents to her survey reported an uptick in “shouting, cursing or making rude gestures,” and nearly 35 percent reported a surge in incidents in which one driver attempts to cause “actual damage” to another vehicle. This matches the few unscientific studies conducted in the United States, like a 2020 survey from the insurance-comparison website the Zebra, in which 82 percent of people reported engaging in road rage or aggressive driving. (Five percent reported bumping or ramming another vehicle on purpose.)

Surveys in the mold of Stephens's paper are useful but inherently limited: Rare is the human being willing to be transparent with a stranger about personal foibles, especially if the foible in question could have caused his or her incarceration or the death of another person. (Stephens pointed out to me that while the respondents to her survey were happy to talk about the aggression of other drivers, a smaller portion were willing to admit fault themselves.)

Possibly the most illuminating single piece of research I've encountered was conducted on the campus of the American University of Beirut by a team of faculty researchers. Titled "Measuring Aggressive Driving Behavior Using a Driving Simulator," the project placed volunteers inside a contraption known as a DriveSafety DS-600c — a converted Ford Focus fitted out with digital displays. The volunteers then "drove" the Focus through a series of three pixelated scenarios, using the gas and brake pedals and the steering wheel to control their progress. (Think of the driving games you see at arcades, and you'll be on the right track.) Only later were the volunteers informed that each scenario had been designed to arouse their ire and test how they would react to road-related stress.

The opening simulation placed drivers behind a school bus stopped on a two-lane road; to get around the bus, participants were forced to negotiate gaps in oncoming traffic, at intervals "intended to trigger the subject's anger and impatience, and possibly instigate aggressive driving behavior." Another scenario involved a left-hand turn across a busy intersection. For every few seconds that the driver failed to make the turn, a car would crawl up behind the driver and commence honking. The longer the wait, the more cars, the more cacophony. And yet the turn was a hard one — the windows of opportunity were short. You either gave in to the pressure of the cars behind you and behaved recklessly, or you waited. Few participants waited very long. "Frustrating events in the driving environment may instigate drivers to drive aggressively even if they may be nonaggressive by nature," the study's authors concluded.



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Crucially, the researchers go a step further: Not all reactions are made equal, they note, because not all people are made equal. Something called “trait aggressiveness” plays an important role in our driving — the more stress and anxiety and fear and anger we experience in everyday life, the more badly we will act when behind the wheel. Hence the cautiousness exhibited by the participants who said they had low or moderate amounts of stress in their lives, and the willingness of their baseline angry and anxious counterparts to risk their own safety.

The problem today, in the United States, may be that we’re all baseline angry and anxious — and we’re all in a car, all the time. Or what feels like it, anyway. Outside the few fully walkable cities or the ones with reliable public transportation, most communities require a car to traverse. And traverse slowly: Traffic is up across the country, as is the duration of our average one-way commutes, which recently topped 27 minutes, the longest in our history.

When Heather Padilla, a professor at the University of Georgia and the director of the school’s Traffic Safety Research and Evaluation Group, decided to start a pilot study of driving habits in rural parts of her state, she discovered that a vast majority of respondents drove everywhere they went (work, the supermarket) and drove there fast. “Relative to other risky behaviors, there was a more accepting attitude toward speeding and more reports of frequent engagement with it,” Padilla told me. Residents felt as if they knew the roads well and were comfortable on them. “It wasn’t uncommon,” she added, “for people to say they sometimes looked down and realized they were going much faster than they’d thought.”

If you have the stomach for it, possibly the clearest window into the changing mind-set of the American driver can be found online, on message boards like Reddit, where posters are free to unburden themselves anonymously — or, more commonly, to vent about others. The most persistent theme may be the story of the instigated turned instigator: a mild-mannered driver forced into action by the conduct of his or her peers. In a Reddit post from October, a driver recounts the experience of being prevented from merging into traffic by another vehicle. “I am not proud of it,” the poster recalls. “I got angry.” A cycle of retaliation followed; at one point, the action spilled into the breakdown lane. “I flipped her off as she did to me,” the poster writes, noting that he came close to clipping her. As he drove off, he realized he “became the [expletive] as well.”

Other Reddit threads are devoted to electronic distraction, a behavior that organizations like the N.H.T.S.A. have recently tried to curb with a multimillion-dollar wave of public-awareness campaigns. In 2007, Washington became the first state to ban texting while driving; as of late 2023, 49 states have adopted similar laws, and 34 states allow the police to pull over drivers for using a hand-held phone behind the wheel. Whether the legislation will prove efficacious in the long term is yet to be determined. For the time being, the trends are stubbornly ascendant: More than 32,000 Americans were killed in wrecks caused by distracted driving between 2012 and 2021, with a roughly 11 percent increase in the number of deaths from 2020 to 2021.

“You don’t even need to physically see them texting — you can tell most of the time by them not keeping a constant speed and veering lane to lane,” one Redditor recently observed. “Almost every time I see someone driving like that, I think, This idiot is playing with their phone, and most of the time I’m right. It’s almost like watching a drunk go down the road.”

Although the poster may not have realized it, the connection is provably true: Studies show that distracted driving increases crash risk as surely as vodka. And the disorientation seems to be enduring. Last year, a team of scientists led by David Strayer of the University of Utah had a group of volunteers climb into a driving simulator and perform a battery of multitasks — check the phone, turn to talk to a passenger. Predictably, their ability to concentrate on driving declined considerably as the tasks were performed. But for many participants, the inability to focus continued for up to 30 seconds after a task was complete. The research is ominous for the obvious reasons, and the less obvious: In calculating which wrecks are attributable to texting while driving, the N.H.T.S.A. focuses on messages sent immediately proximate to a collision. Strayer’s research seems to suggest that the window should be widened — and that more crashes may be a result of distracted driving than current data indicates.

Under increased government pressure, the auto industry has rolled out technology that can nudge us away from using our phones — multiple car manufacturers, for example, have placed sensors on some of its cars that are capable of detecting when a driver’s eyes wander from the road and of issuing a warning via a dash display. But such features are overridable and are available mostly as expensive add-ons to already expensive vehicles.

Brian Moody, executive editor of the website Autotrader, told me he expected more manufacturers to adopt automated safety technology in the coming years, “at lower prices and across more types of vehicles.” However, he went on: “These are businesses we’re talking about, and they’re in business to make money. They don’t want to be sued, and I’m not so cynical to think they don’t care about deaths — they care. But at the risk of being crass, cost is a consideration.”

A young driver in the market for a \$40,000 vehicle can find one with a suite of so-called nanny features, or one with a massive engine and asphalt-stripping torque, but probably not one with both. And young drivers, as has long been the case, tend to account for a lot of the exceedingly dangerous behavior on American roads. In 2012, 4,283 drivers ages 15 to 20 were involved in fatal crashes. In 2021, the last year for which there is data, it was 5,565. As is the case with other demographic groups, more teenagers are speeding: Of all driver age brackets, young males are the most likely to be traveling above the posted speed limit at the time of a fatal crash.

The purest expression of the teenage-speeding phenomenon is the rise in illegal street racing. “I think of it as a plant, or a weed, that hasn’t been taken care of, and during the pandemic, the thing just grew wild,” says Lili Trujillo Puckett, who founded Street Racing Kills in 2014, after Puckett’s 16-year-old daughter was killed during a street-racing event. Puckett now works with courts in California, Florida and Texas on intervention programs for offenders. “When you meet with these guys, they tend to tell you the same thing,” she says. “Yes, they know it’s dangerous. They know they can get hurt and that they can hurt others. But they love the adrenaline rush, they love the excitement, and they have that quality of an immature mind: They say, ‘It’s not going to happen to me.’”

National data on crashes resulting from street racing is hard to find, but officials in California, Florida and Texas, where the phenomenon is endemic, have reported significant increases in the number of complaints — in 2021, the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department received 1,380 calls from residents about local races, up 60 percent from the previous year. Amanda Granit, a spokeswoman for the Hillsborough County Sheriff’s Office in Florida, told me that most of the racers the county’s deputies have apprehended were young and male. But not all of them, she clarified: “We have also arrested female drivers, including a mom in a minivan, for doing doughnuts in the roadway.”

In September, the Department of Transportation posted early-2023 data showing that 21 states had recorded climbing rates of fatal crashes compared with the same period in 2022; 29 had experienced modest improvement. “I can’t claim that we have it all figured out because it could change,” says Col. Matt Langer, head of the State Patrol in Minnesota, where officials recorded a 11 percent year-over-year drop in fatalities. But that drop, Langer says, represents several dozen people alive now who would have been dead a year ago. “And what has made that possible is a focus on the behaviors that are killing people. So speed, seatbelts, impairment and distraction. For us, a full 85 percent of our enforcement work last year was on those four things.”

In 2022, Langer says, his officers spent more time monitoring fast roads and busy intersections and dedicated more enforcement resources to heavy-traffic days like the start of the state’s fishing season, which has been described as a “high holy day for Minnesotans.” “Anything that increases the certainty of getting caught is going to make a dramatic difference,” he told me. “If I know I’m going to die from lung cancer, I’m less likely to smoke those cigarettes. It’s the same thing here.”

Langer is not wrong about the efficacy of stronger enforcement. A country like France is proof. In 2003, the French government began installing a network of speed cameras on its roads and ratcheted up fines. As a result, rates of speeding steadily dropped in the first decade of implementation, as did the number of severe injuries and fatalities. And many provinces in Canada more or less revoke the license of impaired drivers, often impounding the driver’s vehicle for good measure. Years ago, my wife and I took a trip to Australia and rented a car to drive from Melbourne to Sydney. I remember flying down the undulating highway, marveling at the tortoise-like pace of the cars around us. Then I got home, opened my email and discovered a \$400 ticket passed on to me by the rental-car company. Attached was a picture of me behind the wheel, oblivious to the reality that the other drivers had already internalized: The highway was studded with speed cameras.

“I think there’s a day coming where we’re going to have to embrace technology more than we have now,” Langer said of the United States, “because the safety benefits are there. The reduced roadside interactions, the flow of traffic, all of it gets better, including the road becoming safer.” The issue, he went on, is that many Americans are “pretty averse to that type of

technology right now.” On the left, automated enforcement tends to be condemned for disproportionately affecting communities of color and trapping residents in debilitating cycles of court debt; on the right, critics are apt to bristle at any scheme that could be construed as trespassing on a person’s civil liberties.

Deborah Kuhls told me she remembers asking about data from speed cameras that had been installed in Las Vegas. “I got a response saying that Nevada had passed legislation forbidding the use of the cameras in that way,” she said. Kuhls, having lived in Nevada for decades, recognized the politics behind the decision. “A lot of people, a lot of politicians, consider us to be a frontier state, with all the liberty that implies,” she said.

As of 2023, 18 states and the District of Columbia have legalized speed cameras, and 22 states and D.C. have legalized red-light cameras. But eight states have taken measures to outlaw both. In a representative example, in 2013, two St. Louis drivers contested red-light-camera-related citations, claiming that someone else was behind the wheel of their vehicles at the time of the infractions. Their challenge reached the Missouri Supreme Court, which ruled those citations unconstitutional, because they shifted the burden of proving the identity of the driver onto the drivers themselves. For years, nearly every speed and red-light camera in Missouri would be turned off.

Last January, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg delivered a keynote address at the annual conference of American mayors in Washington. The topic was car wrecks. “Somehow, this issue gets dramatically less attention than many of the other transportation issues we face,” Buttigieg began. “Many of you, for example, are rightly focused on confronting the scourge of gun violence. I want to remind you that the loss of life in traffic crashes in our communities is almost identical in its proportions.”

Not long after his appearance at the mayors’ conference, Buttigieg announced the first recipients of the Safe Streets and Roads for All grant program, which will, over the next five years, issue more than \$5 billion to cities and municipalities with documented road-safety issues. When we spoke recently at his office near the Navy Yard, Buttigieg gestured across the street at a construction site. “A good systems design has to account for people making mistakes and prevent those mistakes from being lethal,” he said. “That’s how anything from the way that guy’s tied off on that construction project to the guardrails you have in our aviation system. Of course, behavior matters,” he added, “but you need to surround the work we’re trying to do on behavior with design things that either compensate for behavior or, just as importantly, nudge that behavior in the right direction. Because sometimes being beaten over the head by an ad campaign will have less of an effect on your willingness to drive a safe speed than narrowing the lane by a foot so that it just doesn’t feel like the road itself is inviting you to hit the gas.”

Of the \$5 billion earmarked for the grant program, about \$1.7 billion has already been distributed; the grantee list comprises metropolitan areas (Detroit, Queens) and small rural municipalities, like Fayette County, Iowa, where 60 percent of recent road fatalities and serious injuries have been linked to “lane-departure crashes” — trucks and cars shooting off the road at egregious speeds. Fayette County officials will use the grant to widen the shoulder on miles of highway and add rumble strips to alert drivers when they’ve reached the periphery of the asphalt.

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Engineering 101: The scope of the solution should match the scope of the issue. Rumble strips represent a major step forward for the folks in Fayette, but they would be insufficient for drivers in Hillsborough County, Fla., a municipality that has one of the highest annual traffic-fatality rates of all large American counties — 67.6 deaths per 100,000 residents. Because pedestrian and cyclist deaths there have also outstripped the national average, a significant portion of the \$21.5 million awarded to Hillsborough will go to the creation of protected sidewalks and bike lanes. The remainder will be routed to what's known as “speed management”: more stoplights, more speed bumps. If you're in a rush, you may explosively curse the sudden appearance of a roundabout, but you'll almost certainly slow down anyway.

Calm the traffic, choke the traffic, divert the traffic — or enact a “road diet,” which is exactly what it sounds like. Louisville has pledged to use its own \$21 million in federal money to reduce the number of traffic lanes on 12 busy thoroughfares around the city and “reallocate space for refuge islands, bicycle lanes, on-street parking and transit stops,” a model that has been proved to have an ameliorative effect on fatalities in the United States and abroad.

“I remember as mayor of South Bend traveling with a delegation that was looking at good pedestrian and cyclist infrastructure around Europe,” Buttigieg told me. “And the most striking thing to me was really the story of how each city got there. If you look at pictures of, let's say, Copenhagen in the '70s, you realize very quickly that today's bicycle culture there is not the result of some immutable Nordic affinity for bicycles,” he continued. “It's the result of decisions that they made over the years. Because if you look at those older pictures, you see a place that is as unfriendly to bicycles as many American neighborhoods would be today.”

Buttigieg has cause to be optimistic that those decisions could be replicated here: In contrast to, say, stricter gun laws, road-safety initiatives are less likely to be seen by politicians and their constituents as a partisan issue.

But changing a culture takes time. In 2015, Mayor Muriel Bowser of Washington backed a Vision Zero plan to eliminate traffic deaths in the city by 2024, largely via better pedestrian and cyclist access and the type of road dieting Louisville has proposed. Six years later, in 2021, the capital recorded 40 roadway deaths, a 14-year high. A subsequent report by the D.C. Auditor found that implementation of the plan had been delayed and mismanaged, and it criticized a lack of leadership and follow-through at the city level.

And even in cities held up as exemplars of the Vision Zero model, patience can be required: New York, which has committed more than a billion dollars to building safer streets, recently recorded the fewest pedestrian fatalities in more than a century. But cyclist deaths simultaneously surged to some of the highest levels in decades. In general, as with many types of civic improvement, things can get worse before they get better; cities, and the commuters living in them, have to learn to adapt to a new pattern of life. “The prevailing understanding seems to be that when you introduce more people on bikes and on foot, you have more risk of collision,” Buttigieg said, recalling the evolution of a city like Copenhagen. “But then, over time ... motorists become more aware. The infrastructure and support get built, and the streets get safer.” He paused. “I guess what I’m saying is that I don’t think there’s some cosmic reason, as with gun violence, why Americans should be doomed to worse outcomes than Europeans. But we do have to act.”

Every year for the past decade and a half, the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety has published something called the Traffic Safety Culture Index — a kind of State of the Union of American roads. I had thought the 2022 edition was bleak (the headline from AAA’s news release: “Going in Reverse: Dangerous Driving Behaviors Rise”), but the 2023 report was equally grim. Of the 2,500 licensed drivers who responded to the AAA survey, 22 percent admitted to switching lanes at high speeds or tailgating, 25 percent admitted to running a red light, 40 percent admitted to holding an active phone while driving and 50 percent admitted to exceeding posted speed limits by 15 miles per hour or more — all within the last calendar month.

Worse, a sizable number of respondents said they knew that people important to them would somewhat or completely disapprove of much of the behavior. They did it anyway, despite the risk of opprobrium and despite the fact that, as the AAA dryly noted in an accompanying news release, “a motorist’s need for speed consistently fails to deliver shorter travel times. It would take driving 100 miles at 80 m.p.h. instead of 75 m.p.h. to shave just five minutes off a trip.”

This last point is worth dwelling on, not only because it feels logical, but because this logic can feel rapidly irrelevant once we are behind the wheel. Driving is like this. To paraphrase Ryan Martin, the psychologist and anger specialist, it is the ultimate evoker of base emotions. We may be zipping down the highway, trapped in our own steel bubbles, but we’re influenced by the behavior of the residents of the bubbles next to ours.

“Imagine a time when someone has been aggressive to you,” says Amanda Stephens, the Monash researcher. “How does that make you feel?” She continues: “Most often people will brush it off and say don’t worry about it, or I’m not going to get involved, but if you’re running late or have a stressful meeting to attend, and someone is rude to you then, you might react with aggression or anger directed at them, or at the next driver who does something. That next driver might also react in some way, perhaps becoming anxious and changing their driving.” Bad behavior tends to be contagious: The more of it we come in regular contact with, the more likely we are to drive badly ourselves — and the more likely we are to accept bad driving as the status quo.

Not long ago, I had an Uber take me from my home in Atlanta to the other side of town. The driver, a young woman, wove relentlessly in and out of the late-morning traffic; at one point, confronted by a UPS truck signaling for a left turn, she steered two wheels of her Kia onto the curb. When I politely suggested I would have been OK waiting for the truck’s turn to be complete, she looked back at me in genuine confusion. “What do you mean?” she asked, both eyebrows raised. That was just how she drove. It was just how everyone drove.

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