

Making America walkable: It's a challenge we all share

U.S. streets are becoming increasingly difficult for people to navigate on foot. Where are pedestrians supposed to walk?

Julia Mitchell says she would like to be able to walk to her neighborhood store, but there is no safe way to get there.

"If you had a good arm, you could probably throw a baseball all the way to the drugstore," she said. "But it's very rare that you see pedestrians walking there."

That's because pedestrians in her Arlington, Va. neighborhood must cross a busy four-lane road to get to the store.

"I'd like to see a light put in there," said Mitchell, the mother of two elementary-school-age children. Right now, there's a crosswalk marked with white stripes painted in the road and depending on the time of day, it can be difficult to cross."

"Even though it's less than an eighth of a mile, I'd rather drive it than walk it because it's much safer," she said.

Evelyn Moe, 30, lives in Sumner, Wash., but has the same problem as Mitchell. She says she would like to be able to walk to the nearby Dairymart for milk but there is no safe route.

"I've done it a few times but decided not to do it anymore because of cars roaring by so fast," she said. "If there were sidewalks, I'd feel a lot more comfortable, but this is a county area so funding for sidewalks is much more limited than in a city."

"There's not even a shoulder on the road," she added. There's just enough room for the cars to go by. If you wanted to walk there, you'd be walking out in the muddy fields along the side of the road."

No Room For Pedestrians

The experiences of Mitchell and Moe are increasingly common to many Americans, according to Jerry Scannell, president of the National Safety Council in Chicago.

Everybody out there is a legal user of the space between the right-of-way lines, but frequently, there's only enough space for cars," he said. "And we have many situations where we've almost designed out of our highway system any kind of accommodation for pedestrians."

Scannell is the chairman of the Partnership for a Walkable America" -- a coalition of private, state and federal organizations united together with the common cause of raising public awareness about the need for communities across America to have safe and accessible places for people to walk. Another focus of the Partnership is to emphasize the healthiness of walking -- both the physical benefits it provides for those who do it and the social benefits communities reap from this activity.

According to Dan Burden the state bicycle and pedestrian coordinator for the Florida Department of Transportation, pedestrians have been ignored by the transportation system for many years.

"Since World War II, we've largely built our cities with an outward sprawl where we have to drive a lot of miles and drive them fast so we can keep the drive down to a short commute," Burden said. What we've basically got now are designs based on speed and moving high volumes of traffic. We're discouraging people from walking because we're putting all of the designs into building high speed turns and fast routes out of the city that make it to where it feels uncomfortable and unsafe to walk."

Pedestrians In Peril

The fact of the matter is that these days, it often is unsafe to walk in many places in the United States. Few people realize that for the past few years approximately one in seven motor vehicle crash fatalities in the United States have involved a pedestrian. According to the U.S. Department of Transportation (US DOT), 5,472 people were killed in pedestrian traffic crashes in the United States in 1994 alone. That year, another 89,600 were injured in pedestrian traffic crashes -- many of them quite seriously.

So how do we go about making our roads safe places to walk?

One of the biggest things we can do is put in sidewalks, said Charles Zegeer, associate director of roadway studies at the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center in Chapel Hill, N.C and member of the Institute of Transportation Engineers, a Partner agency.

"The lack of sidewalks or even paved shoulders is a big problem," he said. "Many neighborhoods across the country don't have sidewalks on either side of the street. This is because many cities don't spend the money on sidewalk installations and don't even require developers to build sidewalks in housing areas."

"In rural areas, where pedestrian volumes are generally low, there's also very little consideration for pedestrians," he said. "Not even a paved shoulder or a shoulder of any kind is provided in many situations and pedestrians are forced to walk in the street or in the roadway which can be very dangerous, particularly at night."

Zegeer recommended that cities require sidewalks on both sides of their streets and that rural areas, which tend to have less pedestrian traffic, put in at least an asphalt path or grassy shoulder on both sides of the road for people to walk.

Many people claim, however, that putting in sidewalks and pedestrian paths involves complicated legal squabbles over land rights that local governments don't have the time or finances to untangle.

Burden, however, says this is no real excuse.

"Do you have the same problems when you build a roadway?" he asked. "The answer is yes. But when you're faced with traffic problems, engineers solve them. When it's just sidewalk and pedestrian problems, they tend to let them slide."

Another argument often raised against putting in sidewalks, especially in new subdivisions, is that it will drive up the cost of homes.

But Burden said sidewalks affect the social interactions of a community, which invariably affect safety and quality of life issues in neighborhoods.

What we're discovering is that once you lose the qualities of a street that make it walkable, you lose the social space and you lose the interchange that normally takes place on the street," he said. "So now we're seeing more serious security problems along the streets and more violence on the streets. A lot of school-age children no longer walk to school and the few who choose to do it find that the bullies have taken over the street."

Partnership member Bill Wilkinson agreed: "I think we're poised at our last chance to reclaim our communities and rethink how communities go about developing transportation systems."

Making Room for Walkers

In order for the transportation system to make ample space for pedestrians, a bit of assertiveness training might need to take place, said Wilkinson, who is the director of the Pedestrian Federation of America in Washington D.C.

People, when they are on foot, are the most passive and tolerant of all the users of our transportation system," he said. "People think nothing of sidewalks that simply end or are blocked because of construction or some other obstruction. Pedestrians put up with things that you wouldn't dream of encountering, let alone tolerating in a car."

Other ways that streets could be made safer for pedestrians would be to provide more frequent crossings for pedestrians and longer crosswalk lights, Zegeer said.

"At many of our signalized intersections in cities, the signal timing was not given any consideration for the pedestrian at all," he said. "There's not enough time given for pedestrians to safely cross, particularly pedestrians with slower walking speeds or people in wheelchairs."

According to Burden, pedestrians in many cities must walk as much as a half mile to a traffic light simply to cross the street. These long distances between lights inconvenience walkers and encourage jaywalking, which can be dangerous, especially on busy, multi-lane streets.

"A lot of people, especially older people and children, can't cross the street without a traffic signal, but they try anyway," Burden said. "They end up jaywalking across the street and then the motorist comes back and says the pedestrian is not behaving. Well, the pedestrian is just trying to get from one side of the street to the other in the best way they know how. Why should they walk half a mile to a traffic light that doesn't give them enough time to cross anyway? Pedestrians in the United States are inconvenienced in ways that motorists in this country are rarely inconvenienced."

Another engineering configuration that would help pedestrians would be to place cement median islands or grassy medians in the center of busy, multi-lane streets, Zegeer said.

"That way pedestrians don't have to cross more than two or three lanes at a time and they don't have to judge traffic coming from more than one direction," he said.

Additionally, intersections with squared-off corners, rather than rounded ones, would help with pedestrian safety, Zegeer said. That's because squared-off corners slow down motorists making turns.

"Engineers have tried over the years to provide better roadway systems to handle larger trucks which have sometimes made situations worse for pedestrians," Zegeer said. "One example is that engineers have tried to provide a much wider turning radius at intersections to allow larger trucks to make these turns, but by doing so, this has lengthened the crossing distance for pedestrians and encourages all motor vehicles to make a much faster turn. This has increased the hazards for pedestrians."

Pedestrian safety islands placed just beyond right-turn lanes for motorists, would help pedestrians cross more safely at busy intersections, Zegeer said.

Enforcing Traffic Laws

These design factors are complicated by human behaviors, according to Dr. Alfred Farina, a research psychologist in charge of pedestrian and bicycle safety research for the USDOT National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA).

High pedestrian crash figures are found in many of our large cities and design problems may abound there," he said. "But poor pedestrian and driver behaviors also contribute to the problem. Obviously both factors need to be addressed."

Zegeer and others in the Partnership agreed, saying that enforcement of traffic laws is just as important as improving engineering designs when it comes to making roads safer for pedestrians.

Frequently, for example, motorists making right-hand turns at intersections fail to yield the right-of-way to crossing pedestrians.

"Many drivers are not aware that they are supposed to yield the right-of-way to pedestrians or they choose not to obey that law," Zegeer said. "So many times you'll see a pedestrian having to wait for the motorist to turn. Who's going to win if the pedestrian steps out into the street? Are they going to win or is the 2,000-pound car going to win?"

"Of course pedestrians can claim their share of the blame as well," he added. "They often choose to ignore pedestrian signals and walk during the 'Don't Walk'".

Zegeer cited Seattle as a city that has done a particularly good job of enforcing traffic laws.

"Seattle gives thousands of tickets every year to pedestrians and motorists who violate pedestrian laws and partly as a result of that, pedestrian violations of the walk signal and motorist violations of right-of-way laws tend to be much less," he said.

"If you go to Seattle and watch pedestrians, if it says 'Don't Walk' the

If you go to Seattle and watch pedestrians, if it says DON'T WALK, the pedestrian will wait. It doesn't matter that there's no traffic because pedestrians are conditioned that cops will give tickets whereas in many northern cities, pedestrians cross at will. Also, cars turning right in Seattle are conditioned to wait for pedestrians to cross before making their turn because they know they will be ticketed if they don't," he said.

Seattle's crackdown on pedestrian laws began in 1987, said John Moffat, director of the Washington Traffic Safety Commission and member of the National Association of Governors' Highway Safety Representatives, a Partner agency.

"To me, it's been a real cultural shift for Seattle," Moffat said. "And now, when I go to other locations and see the problems they have, I think we're making progress in Seattle."

According to Wilkinson, controlling speeding is another enforcement issue that would make streets safer for pedestrians.

What we have right now is a system that accepts speeding," he said. There's no effective enforcement and we routinely let cars come off the showroom floor that have the power to more than double the legal speed limit. Additionally, engineers are designing roads that have speeds that far exceed the land-use setting that they're in."

"Our public planning and transportation agencies have got to be assigned and held accountable for providing a friendly environment for people on footer Wilkinson said. When people walk out the front door of their home, school or place of work, they ought to have a choice about whether they want to walk, take a bicycle; take their car to wherever they want to go and the majority right now don't have that choice. The agencies that are in charge of developing a transportation service have put all their eggs in one basket.

Scanned agreed: "I believe that we can make significant strides in improving pedestrian safety without sacrificing mobility. The technology is there. The resources are there. All we've got to do is get people to ask for it."

This article was written for the Partnership for a Walkable America by Emily Smith of the University of North Carolina Highway Safety Research Center

Phone: (919) 962-2202

FAX (919) 962-8710

No permission is needed to reprint this article in whole or in part.