

# A growing pedestrian safety crisis: Speed, short lights and SUVs are worsening a health epidemic

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Credit: CC0 Public Domain

It's an epidemic of a different kind.

The nation is grappling with a [pedestrian](#) safety crisis that has worsened in recent years: The number of pedestrians killed in the U.S. hit a 28-year high of 6,283 in 2018, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. That figure was up 46% from 2010.

While the crisis stems from many factors, a new book brings it into sharper focus. Former Streetsblog U.S. writer Angie Schmitt's "Right of Way: Race, Class, and the Silent Epidemic of Pedestrian Deaths in America" is an exposé drawing upon comprehensive reporting to articulate the root causes of a public health crisis.

Schmitt explains how America's road infrastructure, automotive industry and car culture collectively create dangerous conditions for walkers and bicyclists.

"If we analyze these patterns, they tell us very clearly that pedestrian deaths are not just random acts of God or bad luck, nor are they the result of individual decision-making or laziness (although both [bad luck](#) and bad decisions often play a role)," Schmitt writes. "Pedestrian deaths are part of a systemic problem with systemic causes."

Here are several key revelations from "Right of Way" (Island Press, 248 pp.):

## **Pedestrians are a nuisance**

Think you need a marked crosswalk to head to the other side of the road? Think again.

"In most states, almost every intersection is considered an unmarked crosswalk, meaning that pedestrians have the legal right to cross there, even if there are no stripes on the road," Schmitt writes.

Yet America's roads and car culture typically treat pedestrians as a nuisance, she argues.

## **SUV revolution is a big factor**

Multiple studies have demonstrated that SUVs are much more likely than passenger cars to kill pedestrians when collisions occur, Schmitt said. That reality, combined with the significant increase in sales of SUVs over the last several years, is contributing to the crisis, Schmitt reports.

One of the main reasons is that SUVs are more likely to hit pedestrians in the torso, where their vital organs are located, while cars are more likely to hit pedestrians in the legs. One study, for example, found that large SUVs cause about 110 deaths per 1,000 pedestrian collisions, compared with 45 deaths caused by sedans.

A 2018 Detroit Free Press/U.S. TODAY investigation came to the same conclusion.

## **Police aren't tracking distracted driving adequately**

While experts widely agree that distracted driving is likely a factor in increased pedestrian deaths, data proving this thesis is hard to come by, in part because of insufficient police reporting.

"Traffic safety officials rely on police reports to identify and correctly report instances of distraction—and many police departments' crash reports still do not contain a standard reporting mechanism for cell phone distraction," according to the book.

But virtually everyone uses their phone while driving. On the whole,

smartphone owners physically handle their devices during 88% of their trips, averaging 3.5 minutes per hour, according to cell-phone tracking data from tech company Zendrive reported in the book.

## **Speed is a big factor in survival**

Less than 5% of pedestrians die when struck by a vehicle traveling less than 20 miles per hour. But for those struck by vehicles traveling 40 mph or more, the risk of death is 65%.

"At 60 miles per hour, the force of the blow is like falling off a twelve-story building," Schmitt writes.

She says reduced [speed limits](#), [speed cameras](#) and road design improvements are proven ways to improve pedestrian safety.

## **People of color at a greater risk**

Black, Hispanic and Native American pedestrians face a greater risk than white people of being killed, according to the book. Schmitt notes that people of color are more likely to rely on walking as their primary way of getting around and are more likely to use mass transit, which requires additional walking.

Those factors alone aren't enough to explain why people of color face a greater risk on the road, though.

"It's likely that they're walking in environments where the conditions are riskier, where the streets are designed with higher speeds and more lanes to cross," University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee professor and pedestrian safety expert Robert Schneider told the author.

For example, Detroit, where about 4 in 5 residents are Black, was the deadliest place in America for pedestrians when an estimated 40% of its [street lights](#) were not functioning before the city's Chapter 9 bankruptcy filing in 2013.

After finishing an initiative to replace all of the city's streetlights, Detroit's pedestrian death rate fell by 40% in two years, according to the book.

## **Drivers less likely to stop for people of color**

Multiple studies have concluded that drivers typically don't stop for pedestrians who are attempting to cross intersections with no traffic lights or [stop signs](#).

But they're much more likely to stop for white people than for Black people.

A 2014 study of behavior in Portland, Oregon, found that Black pedestrians waited 32% longer to cross the road and "were passed by twice as many cars," according to the book.

## **Lights often don't offer enough time**

Traffic engineers generally program lights to provide enough time for people to cross at a pace of 3.5 feet per second, according to the book.

But the AARP, the nation's retiree interest group, has reported that "many older people walk closer to three feet per second," Schmitt notes.

That means that anyone walking at the pace of an older person will need 24 seconds to cross a 60-foot-wide street. But they're typically only

given 15 seconds to walk across a road of that length, leaving them stranded in oncoming traffic.

Suburban roads are the deadliest, according to Schmitt. More than half of [pedestrian deaths](#) occur on what planners call "suburban arterials," which Schmitt describes as "wide, high-speed roads that have a lot of commercial and residential destinations."

## News coverage

Journalists often fail to pay enough attention to [road](#) conditions and other factors that contribute to pedestrian collisions when reporting about those situations, Schmitt argues. They often use phrasing that causes people to blame the victim.

Schmitt cites a study that "found that when the pedestrian was centered in the description of events—'Pedestrian struck and killed on east side'—readers were 30% more likely to blame the pedestrian than when the driver was centered— 'Driver hits, kills pedestrian on east side.'"

One improvement that journalists can make is to stop using the term "accident," which suggests that there's no liability or fault associated with the situation, according to the book. Instead, they should use the term "collision."

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