TA Board of Directors
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#	Subject
1.	Searching for the 'Smoking Gun' in US Pedestrian Deaths

From:	Richard Hedges
To:	Board (@smcta.com)
Cc:	cacsecretary [@smcta.com]
Subject:	Searching for the "Smoking Gun" in US Pedestrian Deaths
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Hebrews 13: 2; Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.

(Acts 4:32) And yet again: "Great grace was upon them all. Neither was there any among them that lacked: For as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices

of the things that were sold, and laid them at the Apostles' feet: And distribution was made unto every man according as he had need." (Acts 4:33-35)
"Whenever and wherever societies have flourished and prospered rather than stagnated and decayed, creative and workable cities have been at the core of the phenomenon... Decaying cities, declining economies, and mounting social troubles travel together. The combination is not coincidental." *Jane Jacobs*

"Throughout ancient history, cities have outlasted the empires that governed them. Ask yourself, are there any great countries that do not contain a great city? The answer is no. In fact you cannot imagine any stable state without a stable city. We talk about state-building when we should be talking about city-building." *Parag Khanna*

"The veneer of civilization is paper thin – we are its guardians and we can never rest." *Congressman Tom Lantos*

Searching for the ‘Smoking Gun’ in US Pedestrian Deaths

Why did American streets get so deadly for those on foot or bikes? A leading transportation safety researcher sees some surprising factors behind the crisis.

By David Zipper
April 14, 2026 at 5:00 AM PDT
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Takeaways by Bloomberg AIHide

- The Governors Highway Safety Association announced that 3,2024 people died while walking in the US during the first half of 2025, a drop of almost 11% from 2024, but footgoer fatalities remain 2.5% higher than in 2019.
- The US remains a grim outlier when it comes to pedestrian safety, with deaths rising by half between 2013 and 2022, while 27 other rich nations saw an average 25% decline.
- Nick Ferenchak, a professor of engineering, says that pedestrian safety really comes down to road design, and that the US situation is a perfect storm, with high-speed arterials, distraction from phones, and big SUVs contributing to the problem.

In March, the Governors Highway Safety Association announced that some 3,024 people died while walking in the US during the first half of 2025, a drop of almost 11% from 2024. It’s a welcome dip, but the GHSA quickly put the figure in perspective, noting that footgoer fatalities remain 2.5% higher than in 2019, the last year before the Covid-19 pandemic coincided with a surge in traffic deaths.

Moreover, the country remains a grim outlier when it comes to pedestrian safety: Between 2013 and 2022, deaths rose by half in the US, even as 27 other rich nations saw an average 25% *decline*.

The *New York Times*, *Vox*, and NPR are among the many media outlets that have asked why walking became so deadly for Americans,

and they've found plenty of possible answers, including street lighting and roadway design as well as driver distractions from smartphones and vehicle infotainment systems. Another frequently cited culprit: the expanding size of trucks and SUVs, also known as car bloat. The debate continues to rage.

Nick Ferenchak, a professor of engineering at the University of New Mexico, has had a unique vantage on this conversation. He leads the Center for Pedestrian and Bicyclist Safety, a federal cross-university research program that investigates the dangers that vulnerable street users face and identifies ways to mitigate them. Supported by $10 million in funding from the US Department of Transportation, it's the first University Transportation Center to focus specifically on pedestrians and cyclists.

At a research conference earlier this year, Ferenchak sat down with Bloomberg CityLab contributor David Zipper to discuss what academics have learned about the US pedestrian safety crisis as well as the questions that continue to puzzle them. Their conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

Of all transportation topics, why did you decide to focus your research on walking and biking?

After I got my undergrad degree in engineering, I went to work at a cement plant in Pennsylvania's Lehigh Valley. The best part of my day was my commute, walking or biking on a nice trail. I wondered: "Why can't more people do that?" So I went back to grad school to try and figure it out. I'm still working on it.

How would you say the US is doing with regard to pedestrian safety, relative to other countries?

When it comes to number of deaths and the trendlines, we're number one — and not in a good way. Our pedestrian fatalities have skyrocketed by about 80% over the last 13 years. Over that time most other countries have improved.

What are the biggest reasons pedestrian deaths have risen in the US?

After digging into that question for years, I don't think there is a smoking gun. The US situation is a perfect storm, with high-speed arterials, distraction from phones, and big SUVs. In Europe, roadways are much slower, which provides a level of protection. If you have a big SUV on a street where you're driving 15 miles per hour and you hit someone, they're not going to die. The same goes if you're driving 15 mph and using a smartphone when you strike someone. But in the US, we don't have those kinds of safeguards because our roads are faster.

Also, there is a lot of evidence pointing to suburbanization of poverty being an important factor. Historically, poverty in the US was centralized in the urban core, but over the last couple of decades it has expanded to the suburbs, where around half of all poor people now live. But many suburbs are not built for walking, biking and public transportation; they're built assuming everybody is going to drive. So now you have lower-income populations living there who might not have motor vehicles. They need to walk, and they're doing it in a suburban setting that is not designed to accommodate them.

Is there a particularly common misunderstanding about US pedestrian deaths?

There's a perception that a lot of the increase in pedestrian deaths is due to homelessness or people using drugs and alcohol. But the share of pedestrians who die with alcohol or drugs in their system is relatively low. [The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that around one in four pedestrians killed in a crash had a blood alcohol concentration of 0.08 or higher.] There are still plenty of people who are just walking to work or school when they get killed.

What do you think of the narrative that pedestrians should just stop looking at phones and walking around tipsy if they want to be safe?

It’s not helpful. We should have a road system where people who make a mistake shouldn't have to die and shouldn’t end up killing someone. But if you make a mistake on a seven-lane arterial with cars going 60 mph, someone could easily get killed. I think pinning blame on a person, assuming that people are always going to behave perfectly, is a terrible way to run a roadway system.

It would be great if we could get car bloat under control and reduce distraction. But at the end of the day, pedestrian safety really comes down to road design.

What kinds of pedestrians are especially vulnerable?

Native Americans come to mind right away. In New Mexico, we work with some of the Pueblo tribes and Navajo Nation, and a lot of these communities have very high rates of pedestrian deaths. That is unusual for rural settings. If you look at a heat map of fatalities in New Mexico, Albuquerque and Santa Fe pop up, but you also get these hot spots in Native American regions, where people often lack access to automobiles because of their limited incomes. People are forced to walk or bike on state highways that might not even have a shoulder.

Is there a particular dataset about pedestrian safety you wish you had access to?

I’d really love some way of capturing latent demand for walking and biking, maybe through a stated preference dataset. A lot of our roads are so dangerous that people often refuse to walk or bike, but we don’t know how many people fall into those categories. Proximity alone isn’t a great measure for latent demand, because some short trips are really dangerous, especially for youth destinations like schools or playgrounds. I’d really like to wrap my head around those kinds of topics.

When NHTSA reports quarterly crash deaths , it aggregates fatalities among motor vehicle occupants, pedestrians and cyclists. Is that an appropriate way to share crash data?

It’s not. We need to realize that vulnerable road users have unique needs and think about them differently. The safety of car occupants and people walking or biking can be diametrically opposed, like with car size. We're doing some research about Texas that hasn’t been published yet, and we’re finding that full-size SUVs stick out like a sore thumb. The mid-size and compact SUVs aren’t as big of a problem, but for full-size SUVs the pedestrian fatality rates are incredibly high.

To be honest, even clumping all vulnerable road user deaths together creates issues. Pedestrians are mostly killed in mid-block collisions where they are trying to get across the road, whereas bike deaths tend to occur at intersections or along the roadway.

You coauthored a paper examining 18 cities that had signed on to Vision Zero, a commitment to eliminate traffic deaths. You found that only one of those cities reduced pedestrian deaths. Why isn’t Vision Zero working better in the US?

Vision Zero doesn’t work well in cities where everyone has to drive. In those places it’s hard for policymakers to slow down cars, which is the best way to save lives. Instead of thinking about controlling cars better, Americans need to think about mode shift — reducing the number of people who need to travel by car at all.

Right now cities often end up doing half measures that don’t help much. For example, Albuquerque installed a pedestrian hybrid beacon on a dangerous stretch of road where the nearest intersection is 2,500 feet away. But research shows that people are willing to walk

at most 100 feet out of their way to cross a street safely. Otherwise they'll just take a chance and dash across, even if they know they aren't supposed to.

Do you think autonomous vehicles are a solution for pedestrian safety?

Maybe they will make pedestrian safety better someday. But I'm not holding my breath, and there is really no need to wait.

I was in the Netherlands a couple years ago, and somebody asked about AVs and road safety. They said, "We'll wait to see if it works in the US. If it does, great. If not, we've already got a pretty good safety system here."

We know what it takes to get to zero deaths in a city; it's not some mystery. But if we keep using dangerous roads with bad land uses, we'll end up waiting for AVs to save the day.